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**A New Thoughtfulness in Contemporary China**  
Critical Voices in Art and Aesthetics

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Globalization euphoria and enthusiasm for the West are on the decline in contemporary China. Critical voices make themselves heard in artistic and cultural circles, turning towards their personal everyday lives to take stock. Their questions revolve around concrete experiences in the radical upheaval of lifeworlds, the continued significance of traditions after many of them have been thoroughly uprooted, and the paradoxes produced by the predominance of neo-liberalism. The 17 positions assembled in this volume provide a vivid illustration of such a »new thoughtfulness« in a wide variety of aspects ranging from aesthetics and art to theatre and photography.

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## Preface

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“In recent years the cultural tide has gradually been changing. Increasingly, non-Western new wave artists have tended to return to indigenous experience and local history for inspiration.” Chang Tsong-zung’s observations accurately explain the motives behind this collection of essays. Ever since the 1990s, large areas of China’s culture—and the visual arts in particular—have generally evolved with an eye on the West and on the international art market, and thus correspond to projections of ‘Chinese art’ coming from outside China. This context of ‘opening up’, of cultural colonialist constructs and ideological reflexes, together with the production and dissemination of the corresponding clichés, has also influenced art journalism and theory construction. The choice of themes, the style of criticism and the orientation of fields of discourse clearly conform to international guidelines.

At the same time, however, on the fringes and in fragments, there have been trends which have resisted or explicitly opposed this euphorization—or estrangement from reality—and in which artists, although inspired by the ‘opening up’, have concentrated on their own everyday lives, on the critical survey of their own traditions, and on individual sensibilities. These self-referential insights are not the expression of a reactionary, ‘protectionist’, nationalist mindset; rather, they bear witness to a heightened awareness of the complex changes taking place in the economy and in society, in everyday culture and in urban life. They are the expressions of personal experience and empirical knowledge and are not ideologically formatted projections of a collective imaginary.

It is clear that these trends are presently gaining in importance. While the international art market has proved to be crisis-prone and subject to fashions and trends (‘Indian art’ is in vogue at the moment), the celebration of the West is in decline in China; the topics that are now coming more and more to the fore concern self-positioning, the critical borrowing from tradition and, as a consequence, new structural analyses of present-day positions. This involves questioning our own time, asking how individuality and community can be conceptualized and practised within the global context of neoliberalism and the consumer society; it also involves

the critical working out of definitions and the question of who may and can speak out and manifest themselves and where this can be done.

The contributors are Chinese colleagues who experience and reflect these changes in practice and in theory. The main emphasis is on examples of artistic work in the field of visual culture, and on reflections concerning aesthetic theory. Both mark out an open terrain of interchange between artistic practice, cultural positionings, political intervention and social subjectivations. The choice of authors, the examples and the questions reflect positions and insights that are individual yet can at the same time be considered exemplary. This publication runs the risks of all translations/transmissions. Obviously, misunderstandings have occurred: during discussions with colleagues, in the compilation of the texts, and in our attempts to understand what was being presented. It is to be hoped that the gaps in our understanding will have not only counterproductive effects, i.e. that the experiences of our Chinese friends might act as a productive irritant when we endeavour to think in similar ways or undertake similar things. This kind of transculturality of experiences and discourses can only succeed in a spirit of mutual cooperation: my very special thanks go to all the authors, to my friend and co-editor Zhao Chuan, as well as to Helen Wallimann, Ouyang Yu, Sujing Xu, Hsin-Mei Chuang, Eva Lüdi Kong, Lis Jung Lu and Benjamin Marius Schmidt.

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Traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy—which were, or still are, highly significant for Chinese culture and society—supply a central field and subject of this new reflection. The question is raised of their potential significance in our day, the question also of the possibility and the need to borrow from tradition, to create tradition. *Chang Tson-zung* directs our attention to the so-called literati<sup>1</sup> culture and puts forward the thesis that a new positioning of painting/calligraphy should follow the ‘spirit’ of this culture although—or perhaps precisely because—the conditions of life have radically changed in the course of the intervening centuries. In his contribution, he sketches the main characteristics of this ‘spirit’ and at the same time stresses an interesting difference: whereas intellectuals or artists of today often develop their critical attitudes through confrontation, dissidence, opposition and subversion, literati put into practice a critical culture based on the paradoxical combination of participation and non-involvement in which critical participation was not conceived as interventionist action. This attitude, which forms the basis of an actual culture theory of *shu-hua* (calligraphy-painting), could be seminal for the

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**1** | According to the principle of literati art (*wenrenhua*), which originated during the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), the completely literate, cultured artist who revealed the privacy of his vision in his art was preferred over the ‘professional’, whose art was more immediately attractive.

potential present-day relevance of painting/calligraphy. It also raises the question of the artist's self-conception, of the relationship between intellectuals and artists and, in general, between art and politics. As against the self-conception of the artistic avant-garde and their oppositional gestures, the author draws up an artistic strategy which consists of combining engagement with the present on the one hand with the productive power of desistance, of absence, on the other hand, in the shape of 'conservatism', i.e. explicitly as a continuation of (literati) tradition. This paradoxical conception of contemporaneity could mean that a calligrapher, while using new computer technology and exposing himself in the new media, could at the same time adhere closely to the tradition of the literati and try to carry on their 'spirit'.

What many conservative traditionalists regard as a betrayal is also interpreted by the artist *Lu Dadong* as a possibility for renewal and innovative recontextualization. However, unlike Chang Tsong-zung, Lu Dadong does not go back to the literati but to Zen Buddhism. As a calligraphic artist, he stresses the importance of writing with its complex traditions concerning, for example, techniques, instruments and materials. At the same time, he stresses that writing as an event, that the artistic act as a happening, that spontaneity and intuition are just as important as acquired skills and know-how with regard to craft traditions. The calligraphic act as an artistic action is never determined purely by intent, it can never be fully understood. Lu Dadong refers to various cultural contexts, to Shamanism, Taoism etc. Calligraphy is performance. In his actions he continually redefines the limits and transition points within the aesthetic happening and with regard to the public; at the same time there are no limits as to the means, media etc. employed. He aims at a spiritual encounter with the people who are present, in the belief that the interaction between tradition and the present will take place within the hearts and minds of the participants. Tradition does not have to be 'restored', its presence manifests itself in the artistic (inter)action.

*Kong Guoqiao* follows a similar path by underlining the connection between calligraphy and *dao* (also known as *tao*). *Dao*, the path, is a broad concept and more complex than, for example, the Western concept of idea or knowledge. Calligraphy, as the principal art form in Chinese cultural history, is at the same time a form of personal development, a philosophy and a way of life. It is, according to Kong Guoqiao, world-opening in the Heideggerian sense—but what happens when the world is not the same any more, when everyday worlds in which traditions emerge and take effect and which are also *dao*, the path, undergo radical change? In such a case—and this is Kong's pessimistic answer—one should ask oneself whether calligraphy today is perhaps nothing more than abstract common sense, no longer a cultural element in our *Lebenswelt*: part of our 'inheritance', not art.

*Chen Anying* treats this question more optimistically, although within a wider perspective. Whereas for thousands of years the development of

Chinese society and civilization was characterized by continuity, the past hundred years are marked by breaks, discontinuity and revolution. The result is a fragmented society that can no longer find itself and thus struggles to find its own identity. This fragmentation is the cause for radical change, dissidence, pressure to innovate, and the 'progressive' rejection of all tradition. Against this background, Chen Anying suggests that one should not simply cancel out the tradition of literati painting, which is so central to Chinese culture—an art history which, as he stresses, differs radically from that of the West and stands out as something culturally specific and unique. However, the vistas he opens up remain very general: according to him, the cultivation of this tradition must not be seen too narrowly; it could take place in the new, open contexts and thus counterbalance the modernization euphoria, which is no more than an attempt to cover up the damage caused by the galloping changes of the last hundred years.

A critical appraisal of tradition demands a critical working out of definitions, as *Wang Chunchen* demonstrates, using the term realism as an example. It is important that the term and the practice which he describes are analyzed in their historical context: in relation to their functional attributions in official cultural politics ('social realism'), as an instrument of normative party politics (Cultural Revolution), as an aesthetics of opposition (in the battle against Japan, Korea, imperialism), as a trendy branding (politpop) or as a medium for the subtle observation and reproduction of everyday experiences (grassroots tendencies). In order to talk about and evaluate the possible meanings of 'realistic' art, precise knowledge is required: an understanding of the 'internal' coherence of Chinese history. To this end, additional efforts are also required within China (cf. Wang Nanming's article). The lack of such knowledge can be seen, for example, in the superficial labellings in the international discourse on Chinese art (Chinese art is realistic, political, etc.)

The question if and how traditions are effective and can be discovered and 'updated', is raised in an inspiring way by the artist *Qiu Zhijie*. Following the example of archaeological artefacts, he has created eight pillars made up of cement cylinders. There are texts engraved in the cut surfaces (i.e. the texts are not visible), each pillar containing texts on one particular theme: revolutionary slogans from Chinese history; statements concerning perceptions of foreignness in China; texts from the history of calligraphy; a list of songs from a karaoke bar; e-mails written or received by the artist, etc. This aesthetic concept addresses and exposes the complexity of the question of remembrance and memory. The focus is on aspects of the reciprocity of presence and absence, on the tension between individual and collective memory, the mediality of remembrance and memory, and, crucially, the importance of writing, including handwriting, or rather the calligraphic composition of the ideogram, not least for the ideological formatting of a society. Remembrance/memory always takes place in the imagination and is never physical. Qiu Zhijie composes an impressive picture of this dilemma in his eighth pillar, *luanma* (mess): the column

contains a jumble of random characters which a virus produced in the artist's computer. The unreadable texts that result represent the black hole of not-knowing, which, in remembrance and the construction of tradition, always foils the desire for knowledge. "They [the ideograms] have not lost their meaning: they only deviate from the rules governing our reading. However, we are powerless in dealing with such deviations."

These are the deviations that occur in everyday life and that cannot be grasped through grand narrative formattings or the polarizing of world-cultures. So we have to shake off rigid worldviews, and thus empire ideologies, says *Chen Chieh-jen* in his discussion with *Zhao Chuan*. The two theatre makers deconstruct these worldviews and geopolitical block ideologies by building on people's everyday experiences: *Grass Stage*. Writing is action, intervention, bottom-up; it is not a question of creating politics through theatre—on the contrary, as a joint performance of individual actions, theatre is politics: theatre seen as the voice of those who are normally silent, uninvolved and marginalized. The communion of the many as a 'sharing', on the internet for example, gives rise to an—always provisional—sense of 'people', of belonging to and forming a collective, a community. Aesthetics as the construction of visibility, as a strategy for 'de-empiring'.

Chen Chieh-jen bases his ideas on what he sees in his home country, Taiwan: Americanization and the dominance of international capital, the failure of the politics of reform. It is not the difference between East and West that is decisive, says the author, but the worldwide dominance of neoliberalism. *Gao Shiming* develops this idea further with his observation that the post-colonial debate has lost its bite. 'Localization', 'heterogeneity', 'difference' etc. are concepts which, according to him, have degenerated into slogans of international capitalism. Against this horizon, how can a critical culture and politics that seek to build on tradition without at the same time losing sight of the global context find their bearings? *Bentu* (homeland, literally: soil of one's origins, native soil) is the key word in *Gao Shiming's* subtly argued attempt to define the dialectics of re-signification in the global *bentu* (global 'home') conflict: return as re-discovery, as a process of dissolution and reconstruction, contemporaneity through remembrance that does not seek identity in the fundamentalist sense of going back to national roots. *Bentu*, then, as the historical site of cultural and artistic production, not of Chinese contemporary art but of contemporary Chinese art, a notion that, rather than fixating, opens up. *Gao Shiming* reveals a new range of possibilities with this shift in terminology: "Today we are no longer satisfied with [...] struggling for space and a position in the globalized edifice: we want to create a new homeland, a historical site of cultural creation and renewed subjects. This is the site of 'contemporary Chinese art'—although we lack a profound understanding of 'contemporary Chinese art'; we even lack the basic discourse and a cognitive framework. [...] 'Contemporary Chinese art' is an unfinished plan, a possible world. It is precisely because it is a 'possible world' that

‘contemporary Chinese art’ has nothing to do with any form of nationalism or fundamentalism.”

With regard to the problem of self-positioning and the search for new meaning within our rapidly changing daily lives, art—more precisely, the artistic process and the associated aesthetics of curating, the creation of a public sphere—plays an important role. *David Chen* discusses this aspect by taking as examples two exhibitions which he organized with the artist Gu Dexin at the celebrated gallery *Three on the Bund* in Shanghai. Gu’s installations thematize the exhibition area and the urban context and thus the conditions and economics of the art system. Chen points out possible references to Robert Smithson’s ‘non-site’ and Rem Koolhaas’ ‘generic city’ concepts and procedures. Gu stresses the self-referential dimension of his interventions: by directing attention to the production and performance of art, he allows the viewer to observe his own reception of the art works and to position himself accordingly. This aesthetics, with its intermingling of art and exhibition, creates a variety of small, locally specific narratives which escape the domination of the abstract grand narratives of politics, the art market, institutions, or social formatting.

For *Wang Nanming* and *Zhu Qi*, too, the grand narratives which the West uses to create a picture of China and the Chinese are the principal problem to be dealt with by art and aesthetic theory. Whereas *Zhu Qi* describes in detail the production and functioning of clichés and, with his demand for a distinct Chinese aesthetics founded on tradition, draws attention to the significance of transcendence and abstraction in the history of Chinese art, *Wang Nanming* calls for more exhibitions arising out of a criticism of the projections of the foreign eye and explicitly directed at a domestic public. Whereas the big international events celebrating ‘Chinese art’ use superficial clichés, the exhibitions which reflect individual, specific contexts show that, in order to understand the exhibits and to formulate criticism, a full understanding of all the relevant conditions and circumstances is essential. Without this understanding there is nothing to be done. Using two memorable and impressive examples of art by *Jin Feng* and *He Chengyao*, *Wang Nanming* proves that, and shows how, highly differentiated contextualization is the *sine qua non* of the aesthetic and political power of independent art production and art reception.

For *Jiang Wei*, too, exhibitions are important showcases for the interplay of art practice, aesthetic strategies, the creation of a public sphere, culture-management, and politics. Two important photo-festivals with very different concepts provide examples. One of them concentrates on international prestige and ‘big names’, the other on meeting intellectual demands, on the analysis of visual culture and the discussion of high-brow topics. This difference shows that in China, as elsewhere, there is an expanding field of art festivals, biennials and other big events which are often sponsored by local party bureaucrats and the tourism authorities. The feverish activity of the art market and the art industry produces ever more events which are praised in the loftiest of terms although they

are weak in content and conception and serve primarily as a vehicle for the global circulation of 'art people', works of art, notions and attitudes, and as prestige enhancement for the venues. Against the background of these observations the author considers the development and trends of contemporary photography in China: the purpose and practice of the photographic image, in relation to the record of co-option by Western art or political propaganda on the one hand, and in relation to the present in which photography increasingly engages with the everyday lives of ordinary people on the other hand. (There are connections here to Wang Chunchen's discussion of realism.) The attempt to describe a specific aesthetics of photography—also in the context of an aesthetics of visual culture—is intimately related to the attempt to think the present and to ask what 'contemporaneity' might mean: "Since the 1990s, the Western ideological discourse has been intervening in China at all levels, exerting a comprehensive influence on social and cultural life. Because of our anxious and continuous desire to join the 'contemporary' countries, we regarded 'contemporary' as a once-and-for-all solution. However, for lack of systematic research into Western histories and cultures, we ignored the inherent defects and self-contradictions of this contemporaneity. The picture of contemporary Chinese art was established on this superficial and surface understanding, paying no attention to Chinese matters, the reality of a weak cultural foundation and the lack of contemporary 'software'."

*Dao Zi* regards concept photography (whose beginnings he connects with the political events of 4 June 1989<sup>2</sup>) as an exemplary and innovative aesthetics of committed, self-reflexive, photographic art. In this context, by the way, we can also find explicitly feminist works—still an exception in contemporary China. (See also the work of He Chengyao in the article by Wang Nanming.) As a continuation of concept photography *Dao Zi* names postmodern post-photography, which uses the staging of pictures, the play of construction and deconstruction, the re-editing of historical material, the combination of text and picture, and also experiments with the aesthetic dimensions of documentary pictorial work. This enlargement of the spectrum of artistic photographic practice and aesthetic strategies corresponds with the contingency and fragmentation of present-day concepts of individuality and identity—a correspondence which should be understood as a critique of traditional ideologies and world views and also of the aesthetics that serve them.

As Jiang Wei and other authors stress, artistic practice and aesthetic reflection must be pursued in the context of a new consumer and communications culture. In spite of restrictions through controls and censorship, the internet is omnipresent, and this, according to the artist *Jim Feng*,

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**2** | The Tiananmen Square massacre: On 3 and 4 June 1989 the Chinese military put a violent end to the occupation of Tiananmen Square ('Square of Heavenly Peace') and thus to the public uprising catalyzed by a democratic student movement. Many artists and cultural creatives went into exile or inner emigration.

opens up new productive possibilities, for art is, above all, social exchange. (See his work which is mentioned in the article by Wang Nanming.) This aspiration is, however, continually being thwarted in the established art world by the self-referentiality of ivory tower art as well as by the galleries and exhibitions that cater to the needs of the upper classes. Art is exclusive, communication formalizes. But in the open, flowing world of the internet, different forms of publicness, of direct communication as well as grassroots awareness can be developed, while at the same time, however, the negative side of this 'freedom'—the power and violence of structures and systems—is equally evident. The internet presents the artist with the challenge of exposing himself through his actions and positioning himself self-critically with regards to his approach to the public. Questions of participation and self-management are central aspects of any internet practice which sees itself as an element of the art system while at the same time subverting it from the inside.

There is another venue which could fulfil a similar intermediary role. The theatre is on the one hand the stage and locus of official tradition-building, of traditional pictures, of propaganda. On the other hand it is increasingly the experimental scene of critical artistic practice and aesthetic discourse. Citing various dramas as examples, *Tao Qingmei* shows how directors and groups deal with individual and collective problems in contemporary China. Whereas in the official theatre the collective continues to be celebrated in the emotive terminology of 'community of the people', alternative and contemporary projects experiment with social realities and the experience of the vulnerable, alienated, helpless, vexed, fragmented individual torn between post-1989 depression and the consumer culture. The challenge is how, based on that situation of the individual, one can arrive at a new conception of the collective without falling into the trap of creating just another variant of the official theatre which celebrates the 'new collective' of 'liberated subjects' in the style of the old collective pathos. References to tendencies in popular theatre and the Grass Stage initiatives connect with the article by Chen Chieh-jen and the practice of Zhao Chuan. Another branch of contemporary theatre addresses individuals who see themselves within a new collective context resulting from their existence as workers, from production conditions and related everyday experiences: the actors here are individuals who constitute themselves as such and as subjects by speaking out as workers, by expressing themselves and becoming visible.

What can the collective, the community, the people 'be'? How is it, how are they, to be conceived? These questions, which are particularly urgent today and which run through several of the articles in this collection, lead *Zhang Xian* to his impressive description of how, in China, through political formatting, myth creation and rituals—such as the People's Congress, the Party, and the recruiting of members and representatives—the state and the body politic are construed as empire and become cemented in the people's imaginary. In this way, official (cultural) politics pursue the

expropriation of the people's symbolic capital. Political organs act as "corrupt vested interests groups. [...] They transformed the social and cultural capital as well as every kind of symbolic capital—all of which they had already monopolized—into financial capital. 'State', 'government', 'culture', 'art', 'philanthropy', everything was mixed together and recycled for use in private investments and reproduction. The result of all this was to act as a catalyst for artists' righteous moral indignation at the political rationale." Zhang Xian closes his critical contribution with the metaphorical picture of a herd of sheep which is held together by an electric fence. Again and again the sheep experience electric shocks as they come into contact with the fence, so they continually move back. Finally the electric current is switched off without the sheep noticing. They remain herded close together: "There is no electricity any more, but not one of us touches the fence." To get rid of this mental barrier it is necessary, in times of radical change, to look behind the new imprints of living styles for traces of surviving traditions, traces which are to be found not least thanks to artists. We close the cycle of these investigations with the article by *Zhao Chuan* in which he presents works of art which reflect the impact of tradition on the mind, as memory work and ethics. Painting with dust or water on paper, or piling up stones into small objects in a lonely desert—Zen meditations; thousands of photos of the faces of peasants sitting at a table in a tea-house—the physiognomy of naked life; the ashes of an executed criminal that no one cares about buried in the cement floor of an art place in Shanghai—art as moral action in a society whose ethical foundations are at risk. It is art which records, adjusts something, shifts something slightly, insistingly; quiet gestures of personal concern against the dazzling grimace of the consumer culture.

Jörg Huber

*Translated by Helen Wallimann*