

**Transition and Transformation:
Chinese Contemporary Art and the Value of Dissidence**

by

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Abstract

Transition and Transformation: Chinese Contemporary Art and the Value of Dissidence

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Taking an interdisciplinary approach combining sociology and art history, this dissertation considers the phenomenal rise of Chinese contemporary art in the global art market since 1989. The dissertation explores how Western perceptions of difference and dissidence have contributed to the recognition and validation of Chinese contemporary art. Guided by Nathalie Heinich's sociology of values and Pierre Bourdieu's work on the field of cultural production, the dissertation proposes that dissidence may be understood as an artistic value, one that distinguishes artists and artwork as singular and original. Following the careers of nine Chinese artists who moved to France in and around 1989, the dissertation demonstrates how perceptions of dissidence – artistic, cultural, and political – have distinguished Chinese artists as they have transitioned into an artistic field dominated by Western liberal-democratic values and artistic taste. The transition and transformation of Chinese contemporary art and artists then highlights how the valorization of dissidence in the West is both artistic and political, and significant to the production of contemporary art.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Marie Leduc. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Transition and Transformation: Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Marketplace,” No. 9567, November 16, 2009 to December 17, 2015.

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© Huang Yong Ping/SODRAC (2015).

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Image source: *Huang Yong Ping: Myths*. Catalogue. Paris:
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© Chen Zhen.

99 found objects suspended in a burnt forest.

Approx. 1000 square metres.

Photo courtesy of the artist's estate.

Introduction

Transition and Transformation:

Chinese Contemporary Art and the Value of Dissidence

Like the explosive brilliance of Cai Guo-Qiang's firework drawings,¹ contemporary Chinese art appeared on the art scene in 1989 and has since developed an extraordinary presence in the global international art market. Chinese contemporary art is produced by a generation of artists who, in the 1980s, adopted the practices of Western contemporary art (such as conceptual, performance, installation, and video art) at a time when such artistic endeavours were considered daring and radical in China. The new art was variously referred to as avant-garde (*qianwei* or *qianfeng yishu*), modern (*xiandai yishu*), new wave (*xin chao yishu*), and contemporary (*dangdai yishu*) – names that deliberately distinguished it from the officially sanctioned socialist realist art that had been, for the most part, the only form of art practiced in China between 1950 and 1979. Emerging along with Deng Xiaoping's economic and social reforms in the 1980s, China's avant-garde art received a cautious but ambiguous response from government authorities. The new art was never banned, but artists endured occasional political purges and did not gain the same support and recognition as socialist realist artists until the early years of the twenty-first century. In the meantime,

¹ Cai Guo-Qiang is noted for using burning gunpowder to make drawings on different surfaces, such as paper and fireworks, and to make drawings in the sky. See <http://www.caiguoqiang.com/>.

artists found support among the growing number of Westerners living, visiting, and working in China. By the mid-1990s, galleries in New York, London, and Paris were all vying to represent the new art in the West. Today, Ai Weiwei, Wang Jianwei, Yue Minjun, Zhang Peili, Song Dong, Zhang Huan, Cai Guo-Qiang, Xu Bing, and Huang Yong Ping are just a few of the most widely recognized contemporary Chinese artists.

My awareness of Chinese contemporary art coincided with my first visit to China in 2001, and it was the discrepancy between what was publicized in the West as Chinese contemporary art and what I saw in China that piqued my interest in this new genre. In 2001, and again in 2004, I travelled to different cities in China visiting museums and university and high school art programs. To my surprise, what was celebrated in the West as Chinese contemporary art was not featured at all in China's national and provincial museums or taught in the art programs. The only place I found contemporary art was in private galleries owned by foreigners and in artists' studios located in outlying industrial districts in Beijing and Shanghai.² The unusual disconnect between the marginality of Chinese contemporary art in its own country and the recognition and value it was given in the West made

² Contemporary artists set up studios in industrial districts on the outskirts of Beijing and Shanghai throughout the 1990s. A number of these districts, such as 798 in Beijing and Moganshan Lu Arts District in Shanghai, are now recognized by the Chinese government as special cultural districts, which attract Chinese and foreign visitors.

me ask: what is it that makes Chinese contemporary art so significant in the West?³

Back in Canada after my 2004 trip to China, I had the opportunity to view a major Chinese contemporary art exhibit and see for myself what might contribute to the value and appeal of Chinese contemporary art. In 2005, the Vancouver Art Gallery presented a large exhibit of work by Wang Du, a Chinese artist who had lived and worked in France since 1990.⁴ Wang Du produces large-scale poly-resin sculptures and installations, with his primary theme being the proliferation and impact of media images. By 2000, he had developed a successful artistic career, primarily in Europe, and he had his North American debut in New York that same year. The exhibit in Vancouver included three large works, each filling a single room of the gallery. Two of these works, *Entre! (Enter!)* (2004) and *Tapis Volant (Flying Carpet)* (2003), along with the other works documented in the comprehensive exhibition catalogue could easily have been produced by any accomplished contemporary artist in that there was no indication in theme, image, or media of Wang Du's Chinese origins (Wang Du 2004). For example, *Tapis Volant* is a gigantic, plush carpet with a replica image of the February 10, 2003, *Time* magazine cover of the Columbia space shuttle explosion.

³ I use the capitalized word "West" throughout this study to refer to the liberal-democratic industrialized nations, mostly Euro-American, that are contrasted culturally and politically to China. I am aware of the contentious nature of this word but find it a useful short hand for recognizing the perceived artistic, cultural, and political differences between China and the Euro-American cultural centres where contemporary art is validated.

⁴ *Wang Du: Parade*. Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver. May 28 – September 12, 2005.

Visitors were invited to remove their shoes and walk or sit on the image/carpet, an action that at once evoked childhood stories of magic carpet rides along with the disturbing reminder of the sometimes-tragic consequences of wishful thinking. Only one work in the exhibit, *Le Défilé* (*Parade*) (Figure 1.), featured an obvious Chinese theme. In this multi-figure



Figure 1. Wang Du, *Le Défilé* (*Parade*), 2000-2005, Installation view, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2005. © Wang Du/SODRAC (2015).

sculptural installation produced in 2000, Wang combined Chinese soldiers, protestors, tanks, fighter jets, and guns all aggressively surging forward on a long, low pedestal. Photocopies of pages from Chinese military magazines – the source for Wang Du’s images – were strewn about the floor and military music filled the room. The work had a triumphant resemblance to the propaganda art I had seen in China a few years before, but without the monumentality. The figures were truncated, cut in half, and set so that the viewer looked down rather than up at them. And, dislocated in an art gallery

in Vancouver, the work had an odd, almost clownish appearance, one that suggested that Wang Du was intentionally making fun of China's show of military might. Later, I discovered that *Le Défilé* was the first and only Chinese-themed work that Wang Du had produced.

As the centerpiece of the show, *Le Défilé* was presented as the defining work of Wang Du's solo exhibition as it travelled to different venues in France, Canada, and the United States. *Le Défilé* was also the feature image on all of the exhibition publicity.⁵ Visually, the emphasis on *Le Défilé* promoted Wang Du as a Chinese rather than a French artist and suggested that the exhibit somehow addressed Chinese political issues. The visual impression was reinforced by the press releases, website information, and didactic panels within the exhibition. All of these introduced Wang Du as a Chinese artist and noted his participation in protests related to the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, his subsequent arrest, his release nine months later, and his move to France and thus to a presumed exile.⁶ It was this focus on Wang Du as a Chinese national and dissident, especially after ten years building an artistic career in Europe, that intrigued me.

⁵ See, for example, <http://www.criee.org/Wang-Du-Parade>. The exhibit was partially funded by the French foreign affairs office and L'Année de Chine en France, the French half of a two-year cultural exchange between China and France that ran from 2003 through 2005. The exhibit was presented in Rennes, Lyon, Toulouse, and Paris before travelling to Vancouver and San Francisco.

⁶ See for example, Wang Du (2004), <http://www.criee.org/Wang-Du-Parade> and https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/media_room/pdf/wangdu.pdf.

Further research on Chinese contemporary art indicated the attribution of dissidence was by no means unique to Wang Du. The theme and value of the dissident Chinese artist have been noted by other writers (Butterfield [1982] 1983; Hou 1994; Fibicher 2005; Erickson 2005). In an essay on the Western reception of Chinese contemporary art, art historian and curator Bernhard Fibicher identifies four common *topoi* or themes that recur in the texts about Chinese contemporary art: “the exotic Chinese artist,” “the formerly Chinese, global artist,” “the Chinese artist as threat,” and “the Chinese artist as dissident” (Fibicher 2005:47). The most popular of these themes, “the Chinese artist as dissident,” was applied to Chinese artists just after 1989 and the Tiananmen Square incident (2005:47). As Fibicher notes, it is the *topos* to which “the democratic West immediately took a great liking” (Fibicher 2005:47) and, as a result, Chinese contemporary art styles like Political Pop and Cynical Realism⁷ “sold very well abroad” (Fibicher 2005:47). Chinese “dissident art,” as Britta Erickson notes, also had a beneficial media impact as it “was an attention-grabber, showing the human face of a nation all too recently swathed in mystery” (2005:33). Thus, as curator Hou Hanru concluded in 1994,

[the] interest in Chinese ‘avant-garde art’ is not coincidental. It is connected to the West’s suddenly increasing interests in China during

⁷ The terms Cynical Realism and Political Pop were first used in 1993 to refer to painting styles produced in China after 1989. Cynical Realism employed semi-realist images designed to mock the Chinese social and political situation post-1989 and Political Pop mixed Western pop culture images, such as the Coca-Cola logo, with Chinese revolutionary imagery (Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting 1993).

the 1989 Tienanmen [sic] event. In other words, the event itself has exposed the reality of a political violence and a totalitarian ideology in the country, which awakened the humanist conscience of westerners (Hou 1994:81).

The dissident theme then presents an especially rich convergence of values related to art, politics, and identity. It is this intersection of values, found in the “Chinese artist as dissident,” that inspired the questions that guide this thesis. What role does dissidence, artistic and/or political, play in the recognition of Chinese artists? What role does dissidence play in how contemporary art, Chinese or otherwise, is recognized and valued? What is the significance of dissidence as an artistic expression?

Two definitions are important to these questions: the term "contemporary art" and "Chinese." Contemporary art, as I am using it here, is a specific genre of high art that claims an important part of the global art market. It is a genre that is incredibly diverse, and may include painting, sculpture in a wide variety of materials, installations inside and outside the museum, video and multi-media, texts, and performance. As I discuss in Chapter One, contemporary art is also most often contrasted to modern art in that it tends to emphasize conceptual practices rather than the aesthetic formalism of the art object. Even with this recognized difference to modernism, contemporary art is also often referred to as “avant-garde” in that it is considered the most “advanced” or newest art form in a given location or territory. Especially important to this definition is the recognition that the global or international form of contemporary art that is the focus of this study is also very much a Western product. By this I mean, Western

institutions and agents in key cultural centres such as New York and Paris continue to manage the validation and valuation of this art genre (Wuggenig 2002; Wuggenig and Buchholz 2005; Elkins 2007). Contemporary artworks may be produced and recognized outside of these centres in places such as China, Canada, and elsewhere, but in order to be recognized at the most prestigious levels of the international field, art and artists must be vetted by the agents and institutions in these centres. Contemporary art then, as I use the term, refers to the art that is often exhibited in such premier art venues as the Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Modern in London, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and at important international Biennales such as the Venice Biennale and Documenta. Contemporary art is also the art that is commercially featured in international art fairs such as Art Basel (held in Europe, the USA, and Hong Kong) and FIAC (Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain) in Paris. My focus in this study then is on how art and artists – in this case Chinese artists – gain entry to this very Western-centric artworld and how their work is then valued according the expectations established by the institutions and agents that manage the field.

The word Chinese refers to both a national and a cultural identity. While the cultural identity may be attributed to anyone of Chinese ethnic origin, the national identity, as I use it in this study, refers specifically to artists originating from the People's Republic of China (PRC). I make this distinction because it is primarily artists born in China (who may or may not

have stayed in China) who have been recognized as contemporary artists in the major Western cultural centres. It is these artists, especially the generation born after the Communist Revolution, that have been associated with political dissidence in China both before and after 1989. And, it is these same artists who have become the most successful Chinese artists in the global field of contemporary art.

Artists from China have also been recognized for their Chinese cultural identity, an identity that is signaled by their names, their origins in China, and, often, their use of images and ideas that are recognized in the West as culturally Chinese. The term Chinese then refers to this dual identity. I am not suggesting that such an identity is essential or innate. Rather, following Stuart Hall (Hall 1996a; 1996b), I am proposing that it is constructed by the different converging discourses that come together when Chinese artists are recognized in the West. Hall defines identity as

the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourse and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate,’ speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’ (1996a:6).

Thought of as a “meeting point” or “suture,” the identity of Chinese artists arises from a combination of the artist’s own presentation and “strategic” position-taking (Hall 1996a:3) – for example, the use of Chinese images in their work – and how the agents of the art world understand and mediate the cultural and national attributes of an artist they recognize as originating from the PRC. In coming to the West, Chinese artists are thus recognized and

“hailed” into an identity that meets the demands of “specific historical and institutional sites” (Hall 1996a:4) in the artistic field. The challenge of this study has been to understand the different ways in which Western institutions and agents have “hailed” Chinese artists into an identity that distinguishes them as different and dissident within the context of a global contemporary art field that is situated within the political territory of the liberal-democratic West.

There are also two key concepts important to the theoretical contributions of this study: value and dissidence. By "value," I mean the distinguishing or qualifying concepts that give meaning or significance to an object or person. Here I rely on the definition of value provided by French sociologist Nathalie Heinich. Drawing on Durkheim and others, Heinich proposes that values are the “normative assertions” (2001:312), the generalizations that are “more or less shared” (2001:312) about an object, person, or idea and universally accepted across a particular social group.⁸ Together, values form regimes of belief (value regimes) that shape and give significance to social objects and individuals. Value regimes, for example, are the basis of such ideological constructs as kinship, nationalism, and religion.

⁸ From the French. My translation. “Les valeurs, c'est tout ce qui se présente sous la forme d'assertions normatives par les acteurs, et qui renvoient à des principes censés être universels. La question de l'universalité, ce n'est pas moi qui la pose, ce sont les acteurs. Donc j'essaie de comprendre à quelles conditions un principe fait l'objet pour eux d'une « montée en généralité », une montée en universalité. Il y a « valeur », plus ou moins partagée, dès lors qu'il y a imputation d'universalité à un principe: à ce moment-là, on est bien dans un régime de valeurs” (Heinich and Simonin 2001:312).

In the art world, value regimes support and sustain the idea that art is socially significant whether art is appreciated as part of a traditional ritual, as an object for aesthetic and intellectual contemplation, or as a form of social and political intervention. Each of these ways of understanding art represents different value regimes, and as such different forms or genres of art. Understood in this way, Chinese contemporary art signifies a specific value regime that distinguishes it as contemporary art but also as different by the very word that identifies it as Chinese.

The term dissidence is central to the theoretical premise of this study and important to how I understand the value regime of contemporary art. According to the OED, dissidence is any action – vocal, written, artistic – where an individual or group expresses opposition to a regulation or convention often related to a regulating government or institution (OED 2000). As such, dissidence is “disagreement” or “difference” (OED 2000). Disagreement or difference, however, is dissident only when it is presented and recognized as a contrast and opposition to some value or norm. Thus, I understand dissidence as any sort of action that might be recognized as a “questioning and transgression of limits” (Ashley and Walker 1990:265), as a “dissensus” with a common consensus (Rancière 2010), and as an intellectual challenge to any form of belief or value (Kristeva [1977] 1986). In this study I explore how dissidence is not only an overt expression of political difference or disagreement, but how any “difference” may also be recognized and valorized as transgressive.

The focus of this study is on understanding how dissidence has been valorized as an artistic asset and how this value has come to distinguish Chinese contemporary art. This study begins with the development of a theoretical framework (Chapter One) that considers how dissident difference, whether expressed artistically or politically, is taken up as an artistic value that distinguishes an artist's singular originality in the field. Following the work of Nathalie Heinich, I propose that artists are recognized for their transgressive differences whether these are represented in the form of new and innovative ways of creating an art object, or in how an artist expresses – through his or her art, words, or actions – a challenge to some regulated convention in the artistic, social, and political fields. This study then explores how the valorization of dissident difference has contributed to the “objectivization” of Chinese contemporary art. As Heinich explains, objectivization is what makes art “real” in that it establishes a belief in the value and significance of art (2000). Objectivization involves “both the actors’ capacity to categorise and use a phenomenon and the phenomenon’s capacity to be categorised and used by the actors” (Heinich 2000:166). My aim throughout this study is to try and unfold the different sides of this equation by considering what it is about artists (and the field in which they work) that gives them the capacity to take up and convert the phenomenon of “dissidence” into value, and what it is about dissidence (and the field in which it operates) that gives it the capacity to be taken up and converted into value. My focus on Chinese contemporary art and the Chinese artist as

dissident is then twofold: I want to understand how Chinese artists have used different forms of dissidence or transgression to create value for their work (that is how they have distinguished themselves as different whether this is artistic, cultural, or political), and how the contemporary field, based on Western values, has recognized and valorized the dissident capacity of Chinese contemporary art (that is recognized specific differences as dissidence).

With this theoretical frame, the study follows the lives and careers of nine Chinese artists who emigrated from China to France in and around 1989. Based on original field research conducted in China, France, and Canada from 2009-2011, the study considers how the artists first distinguished themselves through dissident artistic expressions in China, how the institutions and art world agents in the West recognized the dissident value of the artists as they transitioned to France, and how significant events, exhibitions, and discourses contributed to the recognition of the artists and the interpretation of their work as dissident. Through this analysis, the study explores the multiple ways that dissidence is assigned and produced, how the value of dissidence has contributed to the recognition of Chinese art and artists, and how the attribution of dissidence is often both artistic and political.

In addition to my theoretical contribution to how dissidence might be understood as an artistic value, there are two primary and related contributions that result from this study. First the study provides a new

perspective on how Chinese contemporary art has been received and valued in the West, one that more fully explores the importance of dissidence and the dissident Chinese artist. Second, this analysis results in a new understanding of how dissidence is taken up as a value in the artistic field and how this value is then intimately related to Western liberal-democratic values. In this regard, Chinese contemporary art serves as a significant case study for understanding the intersection of art, politics, and dissidence.

With its focus on value and dissidence, this study contributes to the growing body of art-historical literature on Chinese contemporary art, written in Chinese and in languages such as English, French, and German. The majority of non-Chinese publications were produced as exhibition catalogues accompanying large and small exhibits of Chinese contemporary art presented in the West (Fei 1990; Noth, Pöhlmann and Reschke 1993; Chang and Li 1993; Gao 1998; Fibicher and Frehner 2005). These works have been important for introducing and familiarizing Western audiences with individual artists and for establishing an accessible history of the genre. Other publications, unrelated to specific exhibitions, have been dedicated to outlining the historical development of Chinese contemporary art, connecting Chinese contemporary art to Chinese and Western precedents, linking Chinese contemporary art to the social and political situation in China, and identifying trends and sub-genres (Andrews 1994; 1998; Köppel-Yang 2003; Gao 2011). Other works have focused on introducing individual artists and interpreting their work (Nuridsany 2004; Wu 1999; Smith 2008).

All of these studies have made important contributions to how Chinese contemporary art is understood. This research thesis contributes to this same scholarship but differs in at least four ways. First, it aims to provide a new narrative on how the value of difference and dissidence has contributed to the recognition and validation of Chinese contemporary art in the West. Other studies have recognized how Chinese art differs from Western production but none of have explored this subject in relation to how the Western dominated art world validates such a difference as an artistic asset (Fong 1993; Croizier 1997; Barmé 1999; Erickson 2003; Clark 2004; Erickson 2005; Fibicher 2005; Chiu 2006; Shang 2009; Liu 2009; Koch 2011). Most studies on Chinese contemporary art explain the “difference” or originality of Chinese contemporary art primarily in terms of a cultural contrast or difference with the West and Western artistic practices. Some writers have called this difference the “Chineseness” of Chinese contemporary art (Chow 1998; Fibicher 2005; Chiu 2006; Liu 2009; Silbergeld 2009). This difference, as Fibicher has noted (2009), is often referenced in terms of the artists’ “exotic” or cultural difference, their global dislocation, and their political dissidence. The cultural or exotic difference of Chinese artists – often recognized in their use of Chinese images, symbols, materials, and ideas into artwork – is then interpreted as transgressive and original in relation to conventional Western images and practices (Fibicher 2005; Chiu 2006; Liu 2009; Silbergeld 2009). This interpretation of Chinese contemporary art has been employed not only for artists still living in China

but also for artists, like those in this study, who have emigrated to Western nations. These artists are also noted for their transcultural experience, something that Melissa Chui calls “transexperience” (a term she adopts from the artist Chen Zhen) (2005) and Hou Hanru calls “new internationalism” (1994). In both cases, the cultural difference of Chinese artists is proposed as a defining attribute of their transcultural experience that is then activated as a challenge to Western artistic and cultural practices. In this study, I do not dispute the validity of these different interpretations, but rather explore how these attributions of cultural difference might be understood as dissident gestures that are then valorized by the artistic field.

Second, this study considers the attribution of political dissidence in relation to Chinese artists – what Fibicher calls the “Chinese artist as dissident” (2005). Other scholars have recognized the significance of political dissidence in the Western reception of Chinese contemporary art, but this has often been dismissed, both in China and elsewhere, as a latent cold war perception on the part of Western art institutions and agents (Hou 1994; Barmé 1999; Erickson 2005; Fibicher 2005; Liu 2009). Here I take this value more seriously and explore, in depth, how it relates not only to the popular trope of the Chinese dissident but also to the art world’s demand for transgressive or dissident difference.

Third, this study differs methodologically from other studies of Chinese contemporary art. As an interdisciplinary study I apply sociological theory and method to what is ostensibly an art-historical subject. Sociology

provides a frame for understanding the historical development of artistic production in relation to social values and beliefs. My focus is on how different actors – artists and others – contribute to the production of Chinese contemporary art given the social situation of their time and place. The sociological approach introduces a different perspective on the historical development of Chinese contemporary art, bringing a richer understanding of how Euro-American values and institutional practices have contributed to its artistic value and accreditation.

Finally, the interdisciplinary approach of this study allows me to address a much broader question than the reception of Chinese contemporary art. This project also theorizes on how the art world operates as it takes in and recognizes artists through the valorization of artistic and political dissidence. In this regard, Chinese contemporary art provides an excellent case study for highlighting the importance of dissidence as an artistic expression and demonstrating how the production of contemporary art is intimately tied to global relations and politics.

Considering the global dimensions of Chinese contemporary art, its historical parameters (1980s to the present), and the number of Chinese artists who have entered the field, the number of artists selected for this study is deliberately small and specific. The primary subjects of the study are artists Chen Zhen (deceased 2000),⁹ Huang Yong Ping, Wang Du, Shen Yuan,

⁹ Chen Zhen's widow, Xu Min, who manages Chen's artistic estate, kindly participated in this study and completed the interview on Chen Zhen's artistic career.

Yan Pei Ming,¹⁰ Wang Keping, Du Zhenjun, Ru Xiaofan, and Yang Jiechang, and curators Hou Hanru and Jean-Hubert Martin. All of the artists moved to France in and around 1989, and all of them have been recognized as successful Chinese contemporary artists in France and internationally through exhibitions and sales of their work. The common situation of these different artists provides a manageable, but rich source for studying the discursive and material production of Chinese contemporary art and its dissident value.

My focus on émigré artists rather than the many successful artists of the same generation who stayed in China – such as Wang Guangyi, Wang Jian Wei, and Zhang Xiaogang – is intentional. The émigré artists, unlike the artists in China, have undergone a real transition between territorial and ideological spaces. They have had to initiate their move to the West and navigate a new cultural and artistic landscape. Their journey is, in many ways, emblematic of the generations of artists who have travelled to the West, particularly to Paris, in order to be at the centre of the artistic field. Their transition then, artistic and personal, can tell us much about how the art world operates and absorbs new artists, especially as they move from outside to inside a Western cultural centre. At the same time, the experience of émigré artists provides a vivid picture of how the transnational production

¹⁰ I was unable to make contact with or interview Yan Pei-Ming, and thus rely on published interviews and other secondary sources for my analysis of his career.

of artistic value is embodied in both the art and lives of artists who are identified as Chinese.

In narrowing the geographical focus of this study, I chose France over the United States – where other successful Chinese artists such as Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing established their artistic careers – for two reasons. The most immediate is that in 2005 I had the opportunity to view Wang Du’s exhibition, and I completed a research paper that led to some of the questions that are posed in this dissertation (Leduc 2006). In 2007 the Vancouver Art Gallery hosted another exhibit, a retrospective of work by Huang Yong Ping, who also lives in France.¹¹ Second, France is the birthplace of both the artistic avant-garde and a founding location of the liberal-democratic values that have informed the artistic and political values in the West. As such, France provides a rich ideological territory from which to understand the values of the dissident, both artistic and political. France was also the host of the *Les Magiciens de la Terre* exhibit in 1989, the first important exhibit to present and recognize Chinese artists as contemporary. Two of the artists in this study took part in this important exhibit. This exhibit was also part of the Bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution, a celebration of human rights and liberal-democratic values that happened to coincide with the Tiananmen Square incident in Beijing that same summer. Focusing on Chinese artists who moved to France in and around 1989 then provides a rich socio-historical situation for exploring the

¹¹ *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*. Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver. April 5 to September 16, 2007.

intersection of art, politics, and identity that is found in Chinese contemporary art.

As an interdisciplinary study, this project combines art history and sociology. Art history provides the chronological narrative that serves as both an historical ground for the study and the discourse that has, over the past 20 years, shaped the definition of Chinese contemporary art in the West. Art history is what Donald Preziosi has called a “framework of legibility,” that is, it provides a way to make sense of the myriad images and discourses that are understood as fine art. As Preziosi writes,

visual environments orchestrate signification, deploy and stage relations of power, and construct and embody ideologies through the establishment of frameworks of legibility. Such frameworks incorporate and fabricate cues as to how they are to be reckoned with by individual subjects and groups (1989:169).

Art history, in this study, is the discursive framework of fabrication that was already present in the West when Chinese contemporary art was first recognized in the 1990s. It is also the historical space that has been shaped by the difference that this new art brings into the field. As such, it is a discourse that provides the cues to how Chinese contemporary art has been objectivized or “reckoned” with over time. In this study I am concerned with understanding the mechanics of this framework – that is how the value of dissidence has contributed to the historical production of art and how the value of dissidence has been attributed and justified in relation to Chinese contemporary art and artists.

In analyzing the historical production of Chinese contemporary art, I have derived my theoretical and methodological framework largely from the work of two French sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu and Nathalie Heinich. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social fields and his extensive work on art and culture provide a guide for understanding how artists enter the artistic field, how their work is recognized and legitimized, how value is attributed and promoted within the field, and how this value is implicated in different struggles between social fields (Bourdieu 1984; 1989; 1991; 1993; 1996). As Bourdieu and others have demonstrated, artists are produced as much by their own strategies and actions as by the recognition that the art world and other social agents give to the significance of art and artists (Becker [1982] 2008; Bourdieu 1993; Heinich 1998a). The artistic and social fields generate the conditions of belief and affirm the value of art through exhibitions, special publications, market sales, and through the narratives about an artist's work. Through these activities, the field recognizes and consecrates artists by valorizing their singularity and originality.

Based initially on Marxist economic theory, Bourdieu's work outlines how the material and social production of art contributes to the development of the artist in relation to the artistic field and the field of power. The field of power is not a specific institution but the arena in which different forces converge and struggle over the "dominant principle of domination" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:76). In Bourdieu's view, the accumulation and circulation of different forms of capital underwrite these struggles and

the relationships that occur in between social fields so that artists, art world institutions and agents, and national and international interests are all interconnected (1980; 1986; 1989; 1993; 1996). Bourdieu specifies three primary forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social (1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). To these, Bourdieu adds a fourth, symbolic capital. As Bourdieu proposes, artists enter the artistic field from a social space (*habitus*)¹² that is governed by shared conventions and beliefs or values. Within this space an artist develops a career by taking up certain strategies of production, which, in turn, are supported by the accumulation of capital. For example, economic capital is important for supporting an artist through training and developing a career as well as sustaining that career. Cultural capital can be understood as class background, education, and language – all of the cultural factors that have encouraged an artistic career. Cultural capital is closely integrated with economic capital in that an artistic career may be encouraged through such activities as art lessons, visits to museums, or the presence of artworks in the home – all of which often require a sufficient level of economic support (Bourdieu 1984). Social capital is also connected to the other forms of capital in that a person with good economic and cultural capital is more likely to build important supportive relationships in the field that can assist a career in the arts. As Bourdieu defines it, social

¹² The *habitus* is the subjective conception of mind and body that originates from the social and cultural experience that one is born into. As Bourdieu explains, it is a “socialized subjectivity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:126), a person’s being in the world established by their dispositions, language, and lived experience (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:120-40).

capital is

the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:119).

Put simply, social capital is the accumulated network of relationships with teachers, peers, curators, collectors, gallerists, and critics that have encouraged and assisted an artist's ambitions, and provided the necessary social recognition that builds symbolic capital.

Symbolic capital refers to the value given to any one of the other three forms of capital once they are "perceived and recognized as legitimate" (1989:17). Symbolic capital is a value that "disavows" or "mis-recognizes" (Bourdieu 1980:262) the mundane practices of the other forms of capital, especially economic capital. As David Swartz explains, the practice of attributing symbolic capital "deflect[s] attention from the interested character of practices [economic, cultural and social] and thereby contribute to their enactment as disinterested pursuits" (1997:90). Symbolic capital is then the value or prestige attributed to artists, art, and art world practices that makes art a socially significant and valuable form of production.

In Bourdieu's framework, the different forms of capital also underwrite the strategies and tactics of artistic institutions and agents such as curators (Bourdieu 1993:74-141). Museums, galleries, and art education institutions all require economic capital for support and often compete for government funds, private donations, and sales. Connections with large, powerful institutions - wealthy corporations and government bodies, for

example – provide both economic and cultural capital that reciprocally increase the symbolic capital of a museum or particular curator. For this reason, the artistic field is highly hierarchical, often paralleling the economic class system. In the Western or contemporary art field as I have defined it here, there is a hierarchy of genres from amateur landscape painting to conceptual contemporary art. There is a hierarchy of museums from small local museums featuring amateur art to museums like the MOMA in New York or the Pompidou Centre in Paris that feature high art and play a greater role in symbolizing a national culture. Within these different institutions, curators play an especially significant role. Curators bring artists into the centre and can, themselves, acquire as much symbolic power as the most highly recognized artists (Thea 2001; O’Neill 2007). The curator is what Bourdieu refers to as a “consecrated” delegate, a person who is both self-delegated and accepted by the group as a kind of “oracle” (Bourdieu 1991:210-12; Bourdieu 1993:120-125). As important forms of social capital, curators select artists from all of the potential contenders and are expected to “discover” artists and anticipate the new and latest trends. In this way, curators contribute to the symbolic value of artists and genres by naming them, including them in exhibitions, and mediating the significance of the artwork to the public.

Bourdieu’s theory of social fields and how the different forms of capital contribute to an artist’s recognition are important for understanding how the artists in this study transitioned between the artistic and political

spaces of China and France. Bourdieu's work, however, does not examine the specific values that are attributed in the field when an artist is recognized. Rather, Bourdieu's interest has always been in the mechanics of value as it is constructed through the acquisition and exchange of capital and how this value is then implicated in social and symbolic domination. For example, Bourdieu understands the symbolic value of art as class distinction mis-recognized, that is, class differentiation disguised as aesthetic appreciation (1984; 1993). For Bourdieu, the specific significance assigned to such value by the actors and agents in the field is ultimately arbitrary and thus does not play an important part in his analysis (LiPuma 1993). His primary focus, and his strength in relation to this study, is his understanding of how art is produced, valued, and taken up as a symbolic form in the social field and the field of power.

The work of Nathalie Heinich provides an important counterpoint to Bourdieu's theories (Heinich [1991] 1996; 1997a; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; 2005). Since very little of her work has been translated, Heinich is not well known in Anglophone scholarship, but she has had a lengthy and notable career in France and Europe. She has published extensively on contemporary art and sociology, and on how these two fields complement one another (Heinich 1998b; 2004). Heinich completed her graduate work under Pierre Bourdieu, but has spent much of her career trying to differentiate and even distance herself from her former mentor (Heinich 2007; Danko 2008). Their difference is most apparent in Heinich's

methodology. Heinich practices what she calls a sociology of value, which she distinguishes from the “critical sociology” (*sociologie critique*) of Bourdieu (Heinich 2000:163).¹³ Critical sociology is designed to unmask power by demonstrating how forms of value contribute to social domination. Heinich proposes to transcend the axiological opposition that this method tends to perpetuate by taking up Weber’s “a-critical” sociology (Heinich 1998b:71; 2000:163-64). For the researcher this means avoiding the propensity to take sides by valorizing the object of the study on one hand, or using sociology to denounce as false the values of the actors in the field on the other (2000:162-63). Instead, Heinich proposes to suspend her own value judgments in order to consider the “very principles underpinning the actor’s values” (2000:163). Her primary interest is not in whether a value is morally right or wrong, or whether it is used to dominate another, but rather in identifying values and understanding how they are valorized in the first place. For this reason, Heinich takes an admittedly anthropological approach by studying “the actors’ actions, perceptions, conceptions, values, behaviour, etc.” (2000:166). As Dagmar Danko explains, Heinich’s objective is to understand how certain values have been “defined, legitimated or invalidated, constructed, deconstructed or reconstructed by the actors themselves” (Danko 2008:245; Heinich 1998b:77). Heinich’s studies are

¹³ Luc Boltanski and Jacques Rancière, along with Heinich, have provided the most sustained critiques of Bourdieu’s critical sociology (Boltanski 1990; Rancière 2004c; Heinich 2007).

then “analytical and descriptive” rather than “focused on revealing and criticizing structures of domination” (Danko 2008:243).

In this study, I have tried to follow Heinrich’s a-critical approach while still remaining cognizant of how power relations contribute to value construction. My intention is not to judge the attribution of dissidence to Chinese artists, only to understand its significance and the various ways it has been constructed as a value and then attributed, replicated, and applied across a global field. Thus this study is not designed to critically “unmask” the power relations of the art world, something already adequately addressed by critical and post-colonial studies of art (Ferguson et al 1990; Bhabha 1993; 1994; Mosquera and Fisher 2004; Mosquera [1992] 2005; Papastergiadis 2005; Murray and Murray 2006; Elkins 2007). Rather, my interest is in understanding the relationship between dissidence, Western social and political values, and the objectivization of Chinese contemporary art.

Central to Heinrich’s different studies on art, and a key theoretical concept for this study, is her theory of artistic singularity. Singularity is a “mode of qualification” that distinguishes art and artists by their difference from the ordinary (Heinich 2000; 2002; 2005:122). Singularity is the recognition of “what is *hors du commun*’ [out of the ordinary], exceptional, bizarre, even abnormal” (2002:200). Singularity is then the valorization of difference. As the recognition of difference, singularity represents an “exception” to the normality of what Heinrich calls the “community regime.”

The community regime is the set of “common” values, the habituated beliefs of Bourdieu’s *habitus*, and thus the common beliefs that make the world real. Singularity, then, like dissidence, works in seeming opposition to the “community regime” in that it valorizes all that is “uncommon” and different.

Heinich’s studies have focused on how singularity has been attributed and recognized in the artistic field – that is how singular originality has been made “real” by the different events and discourses in the field. Heinich explains this objectivization of singularity as an “artistic event” (2000). An “artistic event” may be a notable and seminal artwork such as Duchamp’s *Fountain* or a major, groundbreaking exhibit such as *Magiciens de la Terre*. Such events are recognized as a break or shift in how art is defined in relation to the norm of the community regime. As such, an artistic event “mark[s] a date” of significance in the art historical record (Heinich 2000:164). Artistic events have the “capacity” to change how art is understood, and to “objectivize” a new “reality” for what art can be. In this way, an artistic event “affects people in a certain way, produces certain effects and generates certain discourses” (Heinich 2000:166).

In her studies, Heinich proposes two approaches for studying the “effects” and “discourses” that make an artistic event singular and “real.” First, she proposes that the researcher should consider “what makes an event for the actors” (2000:164) – that is, how differently situated actors in the field “perceive, feel, use and react” to an event or artwork (2000:164). The actors of the art world include artists, curators, collectors, institutions,

and the public. In her research, for example, Heinich studied the public and art-world reactions to controversial contemporary artworks and commissions in order to understand how these works, taken as “artistic events,” were recognized – negatively and positively – by the different actors in the field. This research led her to understanding how artists, through their work, provoke controversy and how this transgressive (or dissident) gesture is, in turn, mediated and validated by the agents of the artistic field (1997a; 1998a; 2014). Second, Heinich proposes that the researcher should consider the “degree to which a phenomenon is objectivized – meaning both the actor’s capacity to categorise and use a phenomenon, and the phenomenon’s capacity to be categorised and used by the actors” (2000:166). As Heinich contends, the “more actors treat a phenomenon as public (rather than private), collective (rather than individual), external (rather than internal), long term (rather than short term) the more it will ‘objectively’ be an event” (Heinich 2000:166). Thus, in her research, Heinich has studied how art world agents take up the singular difference of an artist or artwork and, through their discourses, defend and promote this difference as exceptional and original. She also recognizes how artists take up certain strategies to differentiate themselves within the field (1997a; 1998a; 2014). Her aim in both of these methods is not to focus on the “intrinsic qualities” of the event or artwork– i.e., its contents, aesthetics, and structure – or argue whether the event, artist, or artwork should or should not be recognized (Heinich 2000:166). Rather, following her axiology of neutrality, Heinich is adamant

that the researcher needs to avoid evaluative judgments, aesthetic or otherwise, and focus on explaining how an event, artwork, or artist is “made” through the transformative power of art-world recognition (2000:162-63).

Still, as Heinich herself acknowledges, one cannot completely avoid the significant impact of Bourdieu’s contribution to our understanding of the artistic field. While not always explicit, Bourdieu’s work remains an important basis for Heinich’s own understanding of the field (Heinich and Simonin 2001:311-12; Heinich 2007). Her sociology of values, especially as it relates to the production of art and artists, depends on an understanding of the hierarchies and power structures of the field and how these shape what is and is not art. With this in mind, I have tried to combine Heinich’s theory of value and Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field in shaping the methodological and conceptual framework of this study. Bourdieu’s theory of fields is important for understanding how the artists in this study have struggled to gain recognition by taking certain positions; how peers and agents (social capital) have aided these same artists; and, how the different relationships between artists and agents have intersected with powerful global institutions and networks that manage the symbolic production of art. Bourdieu’s framework, however, does not provide a model for understanding the specific beliefs or values that sustain the production of art and artists or why one object is designated “art” while another is not. It is at this juncture that Heinich’s theoretical model intercedes. Heinich does not discard Bourdieu’s understanding of the cultural field, but turns it around. While

Bourdieu describes the social arena that supports the belief in art, Heinich considers the positions and struggles of the actors in the field and how these activate the beliefs. Her approach, as I see it, supplements Bourdieu's claims by moving away from the larger overarching frame of the field to focus on the individual actions and events that contribute to the construction of the belief in art. In other words, Heinich's sociology of values allows me to understand how dissidence is not only a challenge to the dominant social faction as Bourdieu would see it, but also how it is constituted as a value and operates actively through the actions of artists and agents in the field. In this study, then, Bourdieu's work on the cultural field provides the methodological frame for understanding the operations of the artistic field, while Heinich's conceptual approach is directed at understanding the values that have contributed to this construction and how they are activated and engaged within the field.

Taking the theoretical contributions of Bourdieu and Heinich as a guide, I have drawn my primary research methods from contemporary ethnography. Ethnography, especially of the Chicago and Manchester Schools, allows for the integration of a range of research methods and a flexibility that suits the historical, geographical, and interdisciplinary parameters of the study (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Creswell 1998; Fetterman 1998; Burawoy 1998; Burawoy et al 2000). More specifically, with its multiple global locations and broad historical scope, this study is better described as a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995; Coleman and

von Hellermann 2011). Multi-sited ethnography, as George E. Marcus proposes, “moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (1995:96). This project then employs an array of research methods including field experience in China and France, document research, qualitative interviews, a study of exhibition records, and narrative analyses. Validation is provided by the triangulation of these different methods and the comparison of data that they present (Denzin 1989; Flick 2004; 2007).

An ethnographic approach that employs multiple methods is also compatible with the methodological practices of Bourdieu and Heinich. Ethnography was a practice that Bourdieu took up early in his career, but, as Loïc Wacquant explains, Bourdieu was loathe to adhere to any one method, believing that “the array of methods used must fit the problem at hand and must constantly be reflected upon *in actu*” (Wacquant 1992:30). Following Heinich, the different methods of this project are then designed to understand the “effects” of artistic events – whether these are solo exhibits, the presentation of a significant group show, or a major world event. Thus, in keeping with Bourdieu’s understanding of the cultural field and Heinich’s conceptual framework for understanding the value of art, this study employs a number of different methods (as described below) to explore how the value of dissidence has been articulated through specific events such as

exhibitions, and how the strategies of artists and curators have worked in conjunction with these events.

The *in situ* fieldwork for this project was conducted before meeting and interviewing the participating artists. The fieldwork is important for shaping my understanding of the contemporary art situation in China and France. The field experience allowed me to expand my knowledge of the artistic field in both of these locations and to validate my assumptions about contemporary Chinese art and how Chinese art has been received in France. After studying Mandarin Chinese in Canada and Taiwan, I spent 10 months (September 2009 – July 2010) at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, China, where I had the opportunity to experience China's art education system and exhibition practices firsthand. The China Art Academy is the alma mater of Huang Yong Ping and one of the most important post-secondary art programs in China. During this fieldwork I met with artists, curators, professors, and students, and travelled to Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, where I visited artists' studios, viewed exhibits, and visited art programs. I combined these activities with art-historical research on art in China in the 1980s and early 1990s. This research included a review of historical Chinese art journals, exhibition catalogues, art reviews, and histories of Chinese art found in the China Art Academy library. The fieldwork and document research provided me with an understanding of institutional and governmental practices in relation to the production and regulation of art in China both past and present; an understanding of the

forms of cultural and social capital important within that context; and, an understanding of the socio-historical conditions of the artistic field in the period before the subject artists moved to France.

I followed my field study in China with a three-month research period in Paris in the Fall of 2010. In Paris, my aim was threefold: to learn more about how the French artistic field operated in the 1990s when Chinese art was first recognized, to understand how Chinese contemporary art and artists had been received and marketed in France, and to conduct the personal interviews with the artists and curators. The interviews with the artists were especially important, not only for data collection, but also because they allowed me access into the artists' personal lives. The interviews were conducted in their homes and studios in Paris where I could see the tangible results of their success and better understand their integration into the artistic and cultural field in France. This personal experience with the artists and curators was complemented by extensive art historical research in libraries and archives in Paris¹⁴ and by visits to contemporary galleries, museums, and art events (such as the annual FIAC art fair). The historical research provided me with source material on the presentation and reception of Chinese art in France since the 1980s, and visits to contemporary sites was instructive for understanding how Chinese contemporary work is presented and marketed today.

¹⁴ Libraries included the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Bibliothèque Kandinsky at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Bibliothèque INHA (Institut national d'histoire de l'art), and the Archives nationales (France).

The qualitative interviews for this study were designed as semi-structured life histories conducted with artists and curators (Brinkmann 2013; Atkinson 2001; Kvale 2007). Eight of the nine primary artists in this study participated in the artist interviews.¹⁵ In 2011, I also interviewed Gu Xiong, an artist of the same generation who had immigrated to Canada rather than France.¹⁶ My objective in conducting these interviews was to understand the forms of capital that contributed to the development of the artists' careers and how, through their art, they had distinguished their artistic difference first in China and then in France. The interviews were guided by a set of questions that progressed chronologically and were devised to guide the artist in constructing a personal narrative about his or her artistic career (Appendix I).¹⁷ The artist interviews were then complemented and triangulated by semi-structured interviews conducted with two key curators – Hou Hanru and Jean-Hubert Martin – who had interacted extensively with the primary artists and had significant impact in promoting their careers.¹⁸ The curator interviews were designed to

¹⁵ I was unable to contact Yan Pei-Ming during my research period in Paris and thus was unable to interview him. As noted above, Chen Zhen's widow, Xu Min, completed the interview in Chen Zhen's place.

¹⁶ Since Gu Xiong immigrated to Canada rather than France, I was unable to include him as one of the primary artists in this study. Still, his interview provided a good comparative perspective from an artist who shared many of the same early experiences as the artists in this study, but did not end up in an important artistic centre.

¹⁷ All interviews were conducted in Chinese with simultaneous English translation except for the interviews with Yang Jiechang and Gu Xiong, which were conducted in English.

¹⁸ My original objective was to include two other curators who have been significant to the artists' careers, Fei Dawei and Jérôme Sans. I was unable to

understand the connection between the curator and the artists, focusing on their shared history and the exhibitions that connected them (Appendix II).¹⁹

After my return to Canada, data from the field experience and the interviews were analyzed contextually in relation to each artist's exhibition record, relationships with important curators, and the artist's rating on the online contemporary art database, ArtFacts.net. ArtFacts.net charts the marketability of contemporary artists by tabulating their exhibitions and sales records (ArtFacts.net). As a measure of an artist's success, the database provided an objective complement to my own research of each artist's career trajectory from the time they arrived in France to 2011 (Appendix IV). In this study, following Heinrich's theory, art exhibitions are understood as "artistic events." Small exhibits, such as solo shows, are significant for an individual artist, as they introduce an artist and provide the initial justification (in curatorial narratives) for the recognition of his or her singular difference in the field. Large group exhibitions are also "artistic events," especially when they significantly shift the perception of what is and is not art or who is and is not an artist. In this study two large group exhibitions are especially pivotal for introducing Chinese contemporary art: the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit in Beijing in February 1989 and the *Les Magiciens de la Terre* exhibit held May-July 1989 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Similarly, a number of Chinese-themed group exhibits

connect with either and thus rely on other interviews and secondary sources for my research.

¹⁹ The curator interviews were conducted in English.

were presented in the West after 1989, all of which are important for affirming Chinese contemporary art as a distinct genre.

Narrative analysis, as defined by Cortazzi (2001) and Huberman and Miles (2002), has provided the primary analytical approach in this study. Guided by the theoretical frame developed in Chapter One, I have considered how the different narratives distinguish the artists in this study as they have transitioned into the Western artistic field. Curatorial essays written in support of specific exhibits and exhibition reviews have been considered as significant narratives in this study. These texts, and the interviews, provide what Cortazzi calls the “teller’s perspective” on the “epiphanic moments, crises, or significant incidents” (Cortazzi 2001). Curatorial essays and exhibition reviews, along with the interviews, are important primary sources for understanding the perspective of the different actors and agents who have been instrumental in advocating the singular originality of Chinese contemporary art.

Finally, my narrative analysis also takes into account the “epiphanic” affect of the Tiananmen Square incident and how this event intersects and relates to the values of the artistic field as Chinese artists transitioned from China to France. The Tiananmen Square incident occurred only a few months after the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit, and coincided that same summer with the bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution and the exhibit, *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris. A key coding for my analysis then was to consider references to this event and how the values it represents in the

West have contributed to understanding Chinese artists as politically dissident after 1989.

Following the methodological approach outlined above, the structure of this thesis is designed to look at how dissidence is taken up and transformed into a value in the artistic field and how this value is then attributed to artists who are identified as Chinese. As I discovered through the process of this research, the attribution of dissidence is by no means uniform and consistent. Rather, it is expressed in different ways and mediated according to the particular demands of the artistic and social fields in which it is recognized. What I try to demonstrate in this study is the complex ways in which dissidence is expressed and how dissidence, as an artistic value, has been mediated in relation to Chinese contemporary art and artists. The following chapters then explore the transition and transformation of Chinese artists through a study of a complex set of social interactions, including the artists' own actions and artistic production, the response and mediation of different agents in the field, the affect of particular artistic and political events, and the meeting of identified Chinese artists with Western liberal-democratic ideals.

In Chapter One I develop a theoretical framework, largely based on the work of Nathalie Heinich, for understanding how the artistic field recognizes and values contemporary art and artists. Key to this understanding is Heinich's theory of artistic singularity, which claims that contemporary artists are valorized for their transgressive differences

whether artistic, social, and/or political. In this chapter, I propose that the transgressive and provocative gestures of contemporary artists might also be understood as dissidence, both artistic and political. Along with Heinich, I propose that this value arises with the modern avant-garde in the nineteenth century, and in close relationship to the rise of liberal-democratic political values in the West. Thus, with this conceptual framework I propose that the valorization of the Chinese artist as dissident results from the specific demands of the contemporary art field and in relation to the political differences between China and the liberal-democratic West.

Chapter Two begins in China where I revisit the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* exhibit in Beijing in order to understand its significance in the context of dissident value. This chapter explores how this exhibit became, through the contributions of China's new avant-garde artists and the organizers of the exhibit, a significant artistic event that signaled the capacity of Chinese contemporary art to be valued as dissident. Here I combine an analysis of capital in the production of Chinese avant-garde art with the conceptual framework for understanding the attribution of dissident value outlined in Chapter One. Drawing on personal interviews with the subject artists and documentary research conducted for this study, I consider how Chinese artists, given the condition of the social and artistic fields in China in the 1980s, initiated their own artistic recognition by taking up Western artistic practices. I then consider how these practices were mediated as transgressive and dissident by the organizers of the exhibit, and how this

exhibit then impacted Western observers who, through their reaction, contributed to making this event a significant “milestone” for establishing the dissident difference of Chinese contemporary art.

Chapter Three moves the study to Paris, France in 1989, where three Chinese artists made their artistic debuts in the controversial international art exhibition, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*. The exhibit intersected with two other significant events that same summer: the bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution held in Paris; and the Tiananmen Square incident in Beijing. Following the theoretical frame for understanding the dissident value of contemporary art developed in Chapter One, and drawing on a personal interview conducted for this study with Jean-Hubert Martin, the principal curator of *Magiciens de la Terre*, the chapter begins by exploring how the artistic and political differences of Chinese artists were recognized and valorized in relation to Western art and artists. The chapter then considers how difference and dissidence were represented in the bicentennial parade, a celebration of global fraternity and liberal-democratic values presented on July 14, 1989. Prior to that date, the Chinese portion of the parade was revised in response to the massacre in Beijing on June 4. The chapter concludes by considering the intersection of values – artistic and political – that result from these different coinciding events and the introduction of Chinese artists in the liberal-democratic West.

Chapter Four returns to a consideration of the individual artists in this study, with a focus on Chen Zhen, as they transition from China to France in

and around 1989. The chapter is an in-depth analysis of the artists' individual careers and how the pivotal events of 1989 have contributed to their career trajectories. Drawing on the interviews with the artists and in keeping with Bourdieu's understanding of the cultural field and how it operates, the chapter considers the different forms of capital that have supported the artists' transition to France, and how this capital – especially social capital – has been significant in their recognition and accreditation. Following Heinich's concept of artistic singularity and originality and how they are attributed, the study also considers the impact of individual and group exhibitions, the artist's production in relation to the specific demands of the field, and the curatorial narratives that have contributed to distinguishing the artists as Chinese and dissident.

Chapter Five takes the study to several different global sites where I consider the important impact of Chinese-themed exhibits that were presented in France, Hong Kong, Berlin, and Venice between 1989 and 1999. All of these exhibits were organized and supported by Western governments and/or organizations without the cooperation of China. This chapter considers how the mediation of these “unofficial” exhibits have contributed to the artistic validation of Chinese contemporary art as different and dissident while, at the same time, reinforcing the political difference of Chinese contemporary art in relation to Western liberal-democratic values.

Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the findings of this dissertation and considers the value of dissidence in contemporary art. Here I consider

how the production of dissident value in contemporary art is an integrative process that is demonstrated through the transition and transformation of Chinese contemporary art and artists in this study. I also consider how this study of Chinese contemporary art highlights the transnational production of dissident value and the intimate relationship between the artistic field and liberal democracy. Finally, I conclude by considering the relationship between the artistic field and what Bourdieu calls the field of power. The example of Chinese contemporary art demonstrates how the valorization of dissidence in art is engaged not only in the struggles within the artistic field – that is, in the disagreements over what is and is not art – but, also in the global political tensions between the liberal democratic West and its Others.

Chapter One

The Chinese Artist as Dissident

Ai Weiwei is the most prominent and widely recognized Chinese contemporary artist. He is noted in the art world for a range of artistic projects that include sculpture, ceramics, video, installation, and performance, but it is his role as a Chinese dissident that has gained him the most notoriety with the broader public in the West. Ai Weiwei has used his art, an Internet blog on Chinese social media, and Western social media such as Twitter and YouTube as a platform for criticizing the policies of the Chinese government.¹ After the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, for example, Ai Weiwei initiated a campaign to count and name all of the school children who had died in the collapse of sub-standard school buildings, information that the Chinese government was not willing to make public. Ai posted the information on his social media sites and commemorated the tragedy in a sculptural installation, *Remembering* (2009), that featured 9,000 children's school backpacks hung on the exterior wall of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany.² Such dissident actions have not gone unnoticed by the Chinese authorities. In April 2011, the police arrested Ai and detained him for 81

¹ See for example Ai Weiwei's website, at <http://aiweiwei.com>, his YouTube channel <http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMsfdtAhgTBoI3MNro-8RAA> and Alison Klayman's documentary, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* (<http://aiweiweineversorry.com>).

² The work was featured as part of Ai Weiwei's *Never Sorry* exhibit at the Haus der Kunst in Munich from October 12, 2009 to January 17, 2010. See <http://artobserved.com/2009/10/go-see-munich-ai-weiwei-politically-charged-so-sorry-at-haus-der-kunst-through-january-17-2010/>

days without charge. After his release his passport was seized and he was barred from travel outside the country. Since then Ai has managed to continue his campaign by accessing banned social media and exhibiting his artwork in the West.

Ai Weiwei is not formally part of this study but provides a paradigmatic exemplar of the Chinese artist as dissident. He very aptly symbolizes the political and artistic dimensions of dissidence that I explore in relation to the artists in this study. The “power” (*ArtReview* 2011:108) and value of the Chinese artist as dissident is clearly articulated in the recognition Ai has been given by the popular media and the contemporary art world in the West. After his detention in 2011, Ai Weiwei, “the Dissident” (Beech and Ramzy 2011), was named a runner-up for *Time* magazine’s person of the year feature. He was recognized as a “designer, sculptor” and “fierce advocate for democratic reform” (Tharoor 2011). In December 2011, the British online art journal *ArtReview* also recognized Ai Weiwei, placing him at the top of their list of the most 100 influential people in the art world. They explained their selection this way:

Ai’s power and influence derive from the fact that his work and his words have become catalysts for international political debates that affect every nation on the planet: freedom of expression, nationalism, economic power, the Internet, the rights of the human being.

Most important of all, Ai’s activities have allowed artists to move away from the idea that they work within a privileged zone limited by the walls of a gallery or museum. They have reminded his colleagues and the world at large of the fact that freedom of expression is a basic right of any human being. In the process, Ai has presented the notion that art’s real context is not simply ‘the market’ or ‘the institution,’ but what’s happening now, around us, in the real world (*ArtReview* 2011:108).

In each case Ai is recognized as a dissident and an artist. In the *ArtReview* text these two identities, artist and dissident, are brought together and valorized as exemplifying the “true context of art” – that is, the promotion of liberal-democratic values such as free expression and human rights. What is not always made explicit, however, is that Ai Weiwei’s interventions, artistic and political, are contingent on his identity as a Chinese national. The recognition of Ai’s art and actions cannot be separated from his relationship to Chinese authorities and how this plays against, and even with, the very real political relationship between China and the West.

In this chapter, I outline a theoretical framework for understanding dissidence as an artistic value in the field of contemporary art, and for understanding this value in relation to the Chinese artist as dissident. Drawing on Nathalie Heinich’s studies of avant-garde and contemporary art (1997a; 1998a; 2005; 2014), I consider how the art world’s valorization of singularity and originality may also be understood as the valorization of dissidence. Following the theoretical view of Pierre Bourdieu, Nathalie Heinich, and others, I take the position that such attributes of value are not produced by the artist alone but are made through the complex relationship between artists, art agents, the public, and the field of power (Becker [1982] 2008; Bourdieu 1993; Heinich 1998a). Art is, then, a symbolic representation of the beliefs and values that are invested in certain objects that we recognize as art. The Chinese artist as dissident, coming as he does from outside the geo-political space of the West, provides then a compelling

and productive starting point for better understanding the convergence of art, Western liberal-democratic values, and dissidence.³

I begin by considering how dissidence may be understood as a value in the contemporary art field. As I emphasized in the introduction, the definition of dissidence is important to my theoretical construction. Here I distinguish two types of dissidence: artistic and political. By artistic dissidence, I am referring to art and artistic practices that are recognized as a difference or disagreement with accepted artistic conventions (whether an artist intended such an interpretation or not). As I outline below, artistic dissidence challenges the common conception of what may or may not be an art object. Political dissidence, on the other hand, refers to an expression of difference (a disagreement) that is recognized as a challenge to political and/or social values. Political dissidence may be expressed in the subject of an artwork or in an artist's actions (as the example of Ai Weiwei

³ I use the term liberal democracy throughout this study as a general descriptor for the political beliefs and practices of Western nations with an understanding that liberal democracy is not necessarily practiced exactly the same in every nation. This is in keeping with political theorists like Dankwart Rustow (1990), Francis Fukuyama (1991), Bhikhu Parekh (1992), and Amartya Sen (1999). Parekh provides one of the clearest definitions (1992). Parekh proposes that Western liberal democracy derives from a combination of Athenian democracy and Enlightenment liberalism. Athenian democracy is community-oriented and focused on the governance of society as a whole, while liberalism is focused on the rights and freedoms of individuals. The combination of these two systems results in a tension between the demands of individualism and the communal operation of a safe and sustainable society. In a liberal democracy, the ideals of liberalism take the lead so that a "liberal democracy is basically a liberalized or liberally constituted democracy; that is, democracy defined and structured within the limits set by liberalism" (1992:161). The most universal features of this system are then "free elections, free speech and the right to equality" (1992:172).

demonstrates). Again, what is distinguished as political dissidence is not always what an artist intended. I separate these two terms, but my purpose in this chapter is to demonstrate how they often work in concert – that is, artistic dissidence may be political and political dissidence may be artistic.

Understanding the role of artistic and political dissidence in contemporary art necessitates a consideration of the artistic avant-garde of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There are three characteristics of the artistic avant-garde that are especially important. First, the avant-garde emerged in France along with the post-revolutionary reforms that helped to shape the liberal democracy that the West knows today. The liberal ideals that initiated the avant-garde are rooted in the same Enlightenment thinking that asserted the rights of individuals to think for themselves and express disagreement with church and state (Egbert 1967; Poggioli [1962] 1968; Heinich 2005). Second, and as a result of the first, the avant-garde was envisioned (by itself and others) as a dissident and revolutionary force that could aid in shaping the new post-revolutionary society. Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), for example, saw artists as the “new priesthood” that would lead society towards a better future (Egbert 1967:342), and the followers of Charles Fourier (1772-1837) claimed art as “an instrument for social action and reform, a means of revolutionary propaganda and agitation” (Poggioli 1968:9). While relatively few artists ever took part in real political action, their work, words, and actions were often taken as dissident and rebellious gestures that challenged prevalent

artistic, social, and political values. Third (and as a result of the other two characteristics), the avant-garde substantially changed the production and value of art by giving a value to dissidence as an artistic expression. Nathalie Heinich explains this value as “an obligatory transgression” that significantly “altered the rules of the art world” (Danko 2008:245).⁴ Important theorists of the artistic avant-garde have also recognized this obligatory transgression. Renato Poggioli, for example, calls this transgression the “antagonism” or “agonism” (Poggioli 1968) of the avant-garde, while Peter Bürger writes of the avant-garde’s “shock” and “provocation” (Bürger [1974] 1984:55-58).

The artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, and Marcel Duchamp, are credited with pioneering the obligatory transgression of the avant-garde. Artists of the early avant-garde, Heinich points out, often provoked their audience artistically, socially, and/or politically (Heinich 2005:165-169). Artistically, artists introduced new styles and techniques that were sometimes shocking in their radical difference to the accepted aesthetic and representational conventions of the time. Socially, the artists often demonstrated

⁴ I use Dagmar Danko’s term “obligatory transgression,” as it better represents what Heinich calls “sois désobéissant” or literally “be disobedient.” Heinich likens the obligatory transgression of the avant-garde to the permissive parent who condones disobedience. As she writes, “Sois désobéissant!’ : c’est la formule-type du *double bind* – autrement dit, le syndrome de la double contrainte. Il s’agit de faire en disant le contraire de ce qui est dit, à dire le contraire de ce qui se fait en disant, plaçant le destinataire en situation d’être toujours en faute : soit qu’il fasse ce qu’on lui dit (“Transgresse!”), de sorte qu’en le faisant il fera le contraire de ce qu’on lui dit de faire, puisqu’il obéira; soit qu’il ne le fasse pas, de sorte qu’il désobéira à l’ordre de désobéir” (1998a:339).

transgressive difference in their art and daily lives. They challenged normative social values and shocked their bourgeois audience by depicting morally and socially questionable subjects (such as prostitutes and peasants). In their lives, many avant-garde artists chose to live on the fringes of society, and took up art as an unconventional vocation and practice (Heinich 2005:82-83,124; Bourdieu 1996:54-60). Still others made politically dissident statements by forming groups, arranging alternative exhibitions, associating with political radicals, and publishing inflammatory manifestos (Heinich 2005:165-69). All of these transgressive acts served two purposes: first, they distinguished the artists and their work from the state-sanctioned production of the French Academy and, second, the transgressive behavior of the artists established a deep opposition toward the larger social field dominated by the growing bourgeois class (Heinich 2005:166-97). It is with these transgressive gestures, the avant-garde declared its autonomy from the bourgeoisie or, as Poggioli calls it, “that part of the public which claims best to represent the civilization of its epoch” (1968:51). The dissident “task” of the avant-garde was then to maintain this sense of autonomy through its “struggle against articulate public opinion, against traditional and academic culture, against the bourgeois intelligentsia” (Poggioli 1968:123). Dissidence, then, whether expressed artistically, socially, or politically, became the primary hallmark of the marginal but elite class of artists and intellectuals who formed the avant-garde.

By taking a socially transgressive and defiant position, the avant-garde not only established a sense of artistic autonomy, it also initiated a dissident challenge to the very definition of art. Duchamp's readymade sculptures, for example, were especially effective in this regard. In 1917, Duchamp submitted a mass-produced ceramic urinal to a juried exhibit. He was not concerned with the formal aesthetics of the object but was intent upon provoking the dominant expectation of what an art object *is*. As Peter Bürger explains, Duchamp's readymades challenged "the very principle of art in bourgeois society" (1984:52), that is, the idea that the value of art is found in the aesthetic appreciation of a crafted object, typically a painting or sculpture. With his readymades, Duchamp presented a provocative question: what *makes* art art? It is this question that continues as an underlying challenge in the later development of pop art, conceptual art, installation art, and performance art in the late 1950s and 1960s, a challenge that initiated the final break between what is now understood as modern and contemporary art (Bürger 1984:55-82; 2010:696).

As Bürger and others have recognized, the obligatory transgression, or dissident gesture, initiated by the avant-garde continues to be a defining feature in contemporary art (Bürger 1984; 2010; Buchloh 1986; Foster 1996). Bürger called this late phase of the avant-garde the "neo-avant-garde,"⁵ and in his 1984 publication seriously questioned the effectiveness of

⁵ Hal Foster provides a more detailed definition of the neo-avant-garde as "a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and 1960s who reprised such avant-garde devices of the 1910s and 1920s as

such dissidence after the provocative contributions of Dada, Surrealism, and Constructivism. The neo-avant-garde, Bürger argued, “can no longer attain the protest value of Dadaist manifestations, even though they may be prepared and executed more perfectly than the former” (Bürger 1984:57). In Bürger’s estimation, the “shock value” of Dada-inspired pop and conceptual art, for example, loses its transgressive potential when the same dissident gesture has been repeated over and over. Bürger concludes that neo-avant-garde, or what I refer to here as contemporary art, only “institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions” (Bürger 1984:58). As a result the avant-garde is left with an unresolvable paradox: its attempts to challenge the aesthetic conventions of the bourgeois institution are, in turn, aestheticized by that same institution. That is, the “provocation that was supposed to expose the institution of art is recognized by the institution as art” (Bürger 2010:705).

Bürger’s critique of the neo-avant-garde has been a central point of contention in the long debate about the value and authenticity of contemporary art and, as such, points to the crux of the “crisis” or “break” between modernism and postmodern or contemporary art.⁶ Initiated in the

collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid, monochrome painting and constructed sculpture” (Foster 1996:1).

⁶ Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-garde*, first published in German in 1974 and in English 1984, was central to the different arguments put forward during the 1980s. See for example, Huyssen 1981, Habermas 1983, Foster 1983, Lyotard [1979] 1984, Buchloh 1984, Krauss 1985, Buchloh 1986, Jameson 1991, and Foster 1996. Bürger responded to the criticism directed at his theory in Bürger 2010. In the next decade, a number of Western academics engaged in a new debate as to whether Chinese contemporary art is modern

mid-1960s, the “crisis” has resulted in nearly half a century of debates about what is “modern,” what is “postmodern,” and what is “contemporary.” Or, put more simply, what is recognized and valued as the most current or avant-garde “art.” By the 1980s, a clear distinction had been made between “modernism” – a genre that has come to be associated with artistic formalism ending in post-painterly abstraction⁷ – and the more pluralistic artistic practices of the neo-avant-garde or postmodernism associated with the conceptual approach initiated by Marcel Duchamp (Huyssen 1984; Reed 1994; Bürger 2010). Today the terms “postmodern” and “neo-avant-garde” are rarely used, replaced by contemporary art as the most common designation for art after modernism. As Hal Foster notes, contemporary art has become recognized as a genre or “institutional object in its own right” (Foster 2009:3). Universities have established departments and professorships in contemporary art, art and art history students take up contemporary art as a discipline, and the most prestigious museums and biennales around the world feature contemporary art (Foster 2009:3).

or postmodern. See, for example, David Hall 1996, Arac 1997a, Arac 1997b, Dirlik and Zhang 1997, and Lu Sheldon 2001. Recent literature on the question of contemporary art includes Smith, Enwezor, and Condee 2008, Smith 2009, and *October* 2009. Several academic compilations on the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde have been published more recently: for example, Scheunemann 2005 and Hopkins 2006.

⁷ As Andreas Huyssen writes, “By that time [1970s], modernism had of course been safely established as the canon in the academy, the museums and the gallery network. In that canon the New York School of abstract expressionism represented the epitome of that long trajectory of the modern which had begun in Paris in the 1850s and 1860s and which had inexorably led to New York” (Huyssen 1984:17).

Still, the definition of what is and is not contemporary art remains ambiguous. Contemporary art, like postmodernism before it, is primarily distinguished by its antithetical relationship to modernism. For example, in a dedicated issue of the American art journal *October* (Fall 2009), art historians, artists, curators, and critics from across Euro-America were asked to consider the meaning of “contemporary” in contemporary art. All of the responses contrasted the two genres: modernism is homogenous while contemporary is “heterogeneous” (*October* 2009:76); modernism is a Western-centric paradigm while contemporary has no “dominant paradigm” (*October* 2009:77); modernism is exclusive while contemporary is “global” and “nomadic” (*October* 2009:74). With no “overarching and monolithic model” (*October* 2009:30), the most specific attribute of contemporary art is that it *is not* modern.

It was the fractious debates in France over modernism and the new contemporary art that inspired Nathalie Heinich’s study of art and the artistic field. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, contemporary art was the subject of a very public and divisive debate in France. Dubbed the “contemporary art crisis,” the debate marked France’s difficulty coming to terms with a changing artistic field (Michaud [1997] 2005; Heinich 1998a:213; Heinich 1998a:226-227). By the 1980s, New York had long surpassed Paris as the West’s primary artistic centre, the artistic field had become more international and less reliant on approval from Paris, and the aesthetic parameters that once favoured modernist abstraction had shifted

to a more conceptual approach (Guibault 1983; 1990; Boyer 1994). After the election of Mitterrand's socialist party in 1981, this situation was exacerbated by the fact that contemporary rather than modern art was increasingly supported by the state through exhibitions, the construction of new museums, and through publicly-funded commissions (Bourg 2004; Poirrier 2004; DeRoo 2006). The economic impact of these changes, especially for the older generation of modernist artists, collectors, and gallery owners, made the transition to contemporary art even more difficult to accept (Michaud [1997] 2005; Moulin [1967] 1987; Moulin 1992; Quemin 2002a; Quemin 2002b). Looking for a way around the impasse between the two sides – those that claimed the authenticity of contemporary art and those who refused to accept it as art – Heinich initiated a study of several controversial public exhibitions and commissions including Christo's wrapping of the Pont Neuf in 1985, Daniel Buren's Palais-Royal commission (1986), and Huang Yong Ping's *Theatre of the World* (1994) (Heinich 1997a). All of these contemporary projects generated some of the most vociferous "refusals" of contemporary art by art world professionals and the general public. Drawing on reviews, letters to the editor, and public comments from museum guest books (*livres d'or*), Heinich considered the evaluative judgments that were used in the negative responses to these projects.⁸

⁸ Heinich's method of analyzing contesting opinions and categories of social values are derived, in part, from the "modes of justification" or "orders of worth (*grandeur*)" that Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot have developed in their study of disputes and disagreements. See Boltanski and Thévenot 1999 and Heinich 1997a:198.

Heinich found that “learned” art world critics “construct and justify” their evaluative positions just as much as the general “profane” public based on a range of values specific to both the “artistic universe” and the “ordinary world” (Heinich 1997a:197). For example, from the “artistic universe,” the commentators rejected the work on the basis of its lack of beauty or appropriate form (aesthetic values), lack of feeling (aesthesis), or lack of meaning (hermeneutic value) (Heinich 1997a:199-206). At the same time, they drew on ordinary world-values such as questioning the “functionality” of a work by proposing that its physical qualities are intrusive or dangerous, its “economic value” because the work was deemed too expensive (especially when paid for with public funds), and its “ethical” impact because the work offended some moral convention. Huang Yong Ping’s *Theatre of the World*, (Figure 2) is a case in point. *Theatre of the World* consisted of a large, turtle



Figure 2. Huang Yong Ping, *Théâtre du Monde*, 1993-1995. Installation view, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2007. © Huang Yong Ping/SODRAC (2015).

shaped terrarium that contained various live insects and reptiles. Museum audiences could view the natural consequences of these different species cohabiting in the confined space. Animal-rights activists, however, challenged the ethical use of the live creatures in the piece (Heinich 1997a:207-09).⁹

From this study, Heinich realized that contemporary art, like avant-garde art, presents a challenge to the public and the learned community on two integrated fronts. First, it presents artistically-dissident gestures that challenge the public to reassess their common sense of what is and is not art, and who is and is not an artist. The transgressive or dissident difference of a provocative artwork forces the public to contrast “abnormality” (what they did not expect) with “normality” (what they did expect) (Heinich 1997a:199-201; 1998a:224-51). An audience familiar with the normality of realist representation or modernist abstraction, for example, is challenged to accept or reject a work that does not meet these aesthetic expectations. Second, a provocative artwork may also be a form of political dissidence in that it may challenge ordinary world values, forcing the viewer to reconsider the validity or strength of any number of commonly held social or political beliefs (Heinich 1997a:206-10). These two dissident challenges are difficult to

⁹ Animal-rights activists protested the presentation of this work in France and, later, in other countries. When it appeared in Vancouver, the Vancouver Art Gallery acquiesced to the demands of activists and had the terrarium emptied of its inhabitants. The publicity, letters, and comments that resulted from the controversy were then displayed on the gallery wall near the terrarium, thus giving not only an explanation for the absence of the creatures inside but also making the public refusal of the work part of the work (Vergne and Chong 2005:34-36).

separate and tend to work hand in hand. The challenge to an ethical or political value, for example, opens the question of what is an appropriate artistic subject while the challenge to conventional artistic practices is political in that it challenges the dominant definition of what is and is not art.

In order to better understand how art-world agents justify the provocative and dissident challenges of contemporary art, Heinich conducted a study of the jury presentations for the 2010 FIAC Marcel Duchamp prize, a valuable and prestigious prize awarded every year to an emerging contemporary artist (Heinich 2014).¹⁰ Heinich attended the four presentations for the prize finalists and noted how each presenter (a curator or gallery owner) advocated for the artist. The presenters followed four specific strategies for asserting the artists' similarity on one hand and difference on the other. These strategies included "tracing the artist's repertoire, placing the artist's work within the context of art history, describing and interpreting the proposition or meaning of the work in the context of the prize, and reconstituting the interpretation of the work given by the artist" (2014:14).¹¹ Heinich found "striking similarities" in how each

¹⁰ FIAC (Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain) is an international contemporary art fair held in Paris every year. Since 2000, FIAC has partnered with the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Association pour la Diffusion Internationale de l'Art Français (ADIAF) in awarding the Prix Marcel Duchamp to a young French artist. The prize includes a cash award and an exhibition at the Pompidou Centre. See <http://www.adiaf.com/en/the-marcel-duchamp-prize/overview/>.

¹¹ From the French. My translation. "Tout d'abord que, par-delà les différences entre les quatre propositions (des peintures sur toile, une sculpture, une installation vidéo, une installation) et les quatre stratégies choisies par les rapporteurs (retracer l'ensemble de l'œuvre de l'artiste,

of these strategies “insisted on coherence while at the same time asserting singularity” (14). For example, the presenters each claimed that their candidate for the prize had the “ability to thwart expectations” (14) by surpassing some previous aesthetic, historical, conceptual, or media boundary. In each case, the transgressive gesture of the work – that is, its difference or abnormality – was justified in artistic terms as the singular “originality” of the work (14). Each presentation was thus not a defense but an assertion that the transgressive and dissident difference of the artistic gesture, even when it provocatively transgressed social or political norms, could and should be accommodated within the definition of contemporary art.

From these two studies, Heinich makes two significant and interrelated conclusions. First, the “obligatory transgression” initiated by the modern avant-garde continues to be a primary generator and indicator of value in contemporary art. In other words, as Bürger concluded, the transgression of the avant-garde has been incorporated into the institution of

replacer sa démarche dans l’histoire de l’art, décrire et interpréter la proposition créée pour le prix, reconstituer et interpréter le compte rendu par l’artiste de sa propre création), il existe de frappantes similitudes entre ces discours : insistance sur la cohérence en même temps que sur la singularité (la capacité à déjouer les attentes), sur les déplacements entre les frontières et notamment entre les disciplines (le cinéma étant systématiquement sollicité), sur la dimension intellectuelle des œuvres et leur capacité à accueillir des interprétations et des références savantes” (Heinich 2014:14).

art.¹² Heinich calls this the “imperative of singularity” (1998a:23); that is, the demand that an artist must distinguish him or herself by transgressing some artistic frontier in order to be recognized and valued in the field. As Heinich’s studies of contemporary art have demonstrated, these transgressions may challenge not only artistic boundaries but also social and political values outside of the exclusive parameters of the artistic field. The transgressive gesture then separates both the object and the artist from the norm, asserting their autonomy while highlighting their marginality. Singularity is then also the recognition and “triumph of originality” in that originality “goes hand in hand with the transgression of canons, the acceptance or even the valorization of abnormality, so that it is what is outside the norm that becomes the norm” (Heinich 1998a:23).¹³ Thus, the “paradigm of contemporary art,” as Heinich explains, “is the valorization, not only of innovation but of transgression [or as I put it, dissidence], by virtue of which art is more valuable the more it transgresses common values” (1998a:259). Even the public has come to recognize and acknowledge the necessity of artistic provocation. As Heinich notes, a visitor to an exhibit of

¹² I use the word “institution” to refer to the multiple organizations, such as museums, galleries, universities, and governments (and their agents) that contribute to the production of contemporary art.

¹³ From the French. My translation. “Cette progressive normalisation de la notion d’avant-garde et de l’impératif de singularité (ou encore cette ‘institutionnalisation de l’anomie’, c’est-à-dire de l’absence de règles) marquera le triomphe de l’originalité, au double sens de ce qui est nouveau et de ce qui appartient en propre à une personne: originalité qui va de pair avec la transgression des canons, l’acceptation voire la valorisation de l’anormalité, de sorte que c’est le hors-norme qui tend à devenir la norme” (Heinich 1998a:23). Here Heinich refers to Bourdieu’s concept of the “institutionalization of anomie” which I discuss below.

Andrea Serrano's *Piss Christ* wrote, "If art does not provoke, then what is it for?" (1998a:259).¹⁴

Admittedly, like Bürger, Heinich recognizes the repetitious nature of such an "obligatory transgression" but, unlike Bürger, proposes an additional value to what Bürger calls the "paradox of the failure of the avant-garde" (2010:705). Calling it transgression to the "second degree," Heinich proposes that contemporary artistic transgression "cannot be understood without the first wave of transgressions experienced by the previous generation" (1998a:237) and that the value of this transgression is always contingent on its historical precedent – that is, the original value of art is found in its difference or contrast to what has come before it.

Heinich explains this proposal more thoroughly in her 2014 book, where she uses the structuralist model of a paradigm derived from Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific change.¹⁵ A paradigm is

a general structuring design accepted at a given point in time and applied to a particular domain of human activity: not so much as a common model because the notion of model implies that we follow it consciously, but as a cognitive base shared by all (2014: 42-43).¹⁶

¹⁴ From the French. My translation. "Plus spécifique du paradigme de l'art contemporain est la valorisation, non seulement de l'innovation mais de la transgression, en vertu de quoi l'art est d'autant plus valable qu'il est plus transgressif des valeurs communes. 'Si l'art ne provoque pas, alors à quoi sert-il?' écrit un visiteur sur le livre d'or de l'exposition Serrano à Philadelphie où se trouvait *Piss Christ*" (Heinich 1998a:259).

¹⁵ Heinich points out that she is not the first to propose using Kuhn's model of the scientific paradigm in relation to the development of art. She credits Richard Brown and Remi Clignet, but explains how her use of the paradigm differs from theirs (2014:44).

¹⁶ From the French. My translation. "Un paradigme, en d'autres termes, c'est une structuration générale des conceptions admises à un moment donné du temps à propos d'un domaine de l'activité humaine : non tant un modèle

A paradigm is never static but helps to explain the “series of breaks” or “revolutions” that happen in scientific (or in this case, artistic) knowledge over time (2014:43-49). Following Kuhn, Heinich proposes that the establishment of a new paradigm requires the formation of a small group or collective (like the avant-garde) that instigates “not a simple difference of opinion but a real ‘dispute’ i.e., a disagreement not only about how to solve the problem but also how to even put it down” (2014:45). The dispute then results in “an effective change of collective representation”(2014:45).¹⁷ According to this proposal, the history of the artistic field can be understood as a series of such paradigm shifts, so that “contemporary art is incompatible not only with classical art, but also and especially with modern art, which it succeeded, and against which it is constructed” (2014:49).¹⁸ The transgressive gesture of contemporary art, that is, transgression to the

commun car la notion de modèle sous-entend qu’on le suive consciemment qu’un socle cognitif partagé par tous” (Heinich 2014:42-43).

¹⁷ From the French. My translation. “Pour qu’une révolution scientifique, selon lui, se produise, il faut un certain nombre de conditions: l’existence d’un collectif, car des individus isolés ne suffisent pas à la constitution d’un nouveau paradigme; le fait que ce collectif prenne la forme d’un groupe restreint et non pas d’une vague ‘communauté’; l’apparition d’une controverse, qui ne soit pas une simple divergence d’opinions mais un véritable ‘différend,’ c’est-à-dire un désaccord portant non seulement sur la façon de résoudre le problème mais aussi sur la façon même de le poser; enfin, suite à ce différend, un changement effectif des représentations collectives” (Heinich 2014:45).

¹⁸ From the French. My translation. “Arrivé à ce degré d’incompatibilité entre paradigmes l’art contemporain étant incompatible non seulement avec l’art classique, mais aussi et surtout avec l’art moderne, auquel il succède et par rapport auquel il se construit, plus aucune discussion argumentée entre partisans des uns et des autres ne peut suffire à emporter la conviction” (Heinich 2014:49).

second degree, always looks back and reflexively responds to its historical limit.¹⁹ Artistic and/or political dissidence is then always premised on its contrasting difference to what is considered a common norm or convention.

Second, Heinrich proposes that the recognition of artistic singularity, manifested in works as controversial as Serrano's *Piss Christ* and Huang Yong Ping's *Theatre of the World*, requires the mediation and support of the very institution that is often questioned and challenged by contemporary art. The institution of art is always actively involved in bringing about a paradigm shift. Heinrich calls this the "permissive paradox" (Heinich 1998a:338). The "permissive paradox" means that the institution that "forms the boundary between what is included and excluded, authentic and inauthentic, art and non-art" is the very same institution that requires artists to define themselves with a "transgressive gesture" (Heinich 1998a:338) even if that gesture is directed at the institution.²⁰ The institution then both authorizes transgression and recognizes its originality. Put another way, Poggioli points out that the anti-conventionality of the avant-garde is itself a convention in that "deviation from the norm is so regular and normal a fact that it is transformed into a canon no less exceptional than predictable" (Poggioli

¹⁹ The persistence of historical repetition in art is the subject of Rosalind Krauss' seminal essay, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde" (1984).

²⁰ From the French. My translation. "La permissivité, c'est l'autorisation des transgressions: en l'occurrence, la transgression des frontières de l'art, de la morale ou de la loi, autorisée par les institutions artistiques. Le paradoxe, c'est quand l'autorité qui autorise la transgression est celle-là même contre laquelle se définit le geste transgressif: en l'occurrence, l'institution qui délimite la frontière entre inclus et exclus, authentique et inauthentique, art et non-art" (Heinich 1998a:338).

1968:56). Or, as Bürger recognized, the neo-avant-garde or contemporary art “institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art*” (Bürger 1984:58). Dissidence, then, is both a requirement and a mediated value that only becomes an asset once it is recognized and vetted by the agents and institutions in the field of contemporary art.

By way of explanation and as a result of these two conclusions, Heinich likens the field of contemporary art to a three-hand game (*triple jeu*) or *main chaude* that continually completes a dialectical transition of “transgression, reaction, and integration” (1998a:19-51). *Main chaude* is an old parlour or children’s game that has widely different variants.²¹ Here, Heinich proposes a version where three people place one hand each on top of the other and then each person tries to quickly shift their hand to the top position. Her point in this analogy is that “one cannot think of one hand without thinking of the other two” (1998a:53). The artistic game is one of “interdependence” (in the sense used by Norbert Elias) (1998a:53-54),²² where one cannot conceive of “artists without a public or specialists, the transgressions without frontiers to push against, to reaffirm and to replace”

²¹ “Main chaude: Jeu de superposition des mains où celle du dessous vient se placer par-dessus” (Heinich 1998a:52).

²² In her book, *La sociologie de Norbert Elias*, Heinich explains that interdependence is a “key concept” in Elias’ theory ([1997] 2002:11). He developed the theory in *Society of the Individual* (1987) and used the term to break from the linear concept of causality in social theory. He proposed that all opposites (ontological and social) are interrelated by a balance of tensions even when such relationships are not always acknowledged. He explained this balance in the simple formula: “Nous faisons partie les uns des autres (We are part of one another)” (Heinich [1997] 2002:86). Like Heinich he also used the analogy of a game (soccer) to explain how interdependence functions within a social field (Heinich [1997] 2002:8).

(1998a:53).²³ Thus, the first hand of the game is played by the artist who, by producing and presenting a work, transgresses an artistic, social, or political “frontier” (1998a:328). The second hand is played by the spectators (or critics and art world followers) who provide “the negative reaction, the scandalized refusal” (1998a:330) of the work. The third hand is played by the museum or art institution, with its adjunct administrators such as the curator who is not only the “mediator but also, in a certain fashion, co-producer, if not co-author of the proposition” (1998a:331). As the provocateur, the institution encourages and sanctions the transgressive acts of the artist, presents the work, and provides the primary response to the negative refusal. Exhibitions, essays, histories, and the weighty recommendation of significant peers, major museums, and important galleries all attest to the singularity and authenticity of the artist and the work. Thus, the “objective of the game,” Heinich explains,

is no longer today as it was yesterday, between modernists and conservatives, avant-garde and traditionalists: it is between the risk of innovation by the creators and the encouragement of innovations by the institutions, between the transgression of norms and its annulment by the widening of these norms in the measure of new transgressions, between artistic provocation and its official assimilation, between the defier of good sense and the creation of sense, between the destruction of criteria and their reconstruction, between the transgressive hand of some and the integrative hand of others (1998a:344-45).²⁴

²³ From the French. My translation. “C’est le principe du ‘triple jeu’: on ne peut penser une main sans penser les deux autres, les artistes sans publics et sans spécialistes, les transgressions sans frontières à bousculer, à réaffirmer et à déplacer. Le concept d’interdépendance cher à Norbert Elias est ici, plus que jamais, indispensable au sociologue” (Heinich 1998a:53-54).

²⁴ From the French. My translation. “Ainsi l’essentiel du jeu n’est plus aujourd’hui, comme il le fut naguère, entre modernistes et conservateurs,

In this way, Heinrich proposes, contemporary art continues to re-assert an “operation that has been reiterated by the artistic avant-garde since the beginning of the century: that is transgressing one frontier and, in transgressing it, revealing it to us” (Heinich 1998a:9). The game of contemporary art is then an “institutionalized” revolution, one that continually changes what is and is not art through its transgression of both artistic and political norms.

The “contemporary art crisis” in France, as well as the unresolved debates about modernism, postmodernism, and the neo-avant-garde, can be understood in relation to this three-hand game. The “crisis,” as Heinrich suggests, may appear as “detractors on one side and partisans on the other” (Heinich 1998a:213), but it is more accurately not “a defense of a certain tradition” – for example, modernism versus contemporary – but “a defense of a certain conception of modernity, even of the avant-garde, against another” (Heinich 1998a:229).²⁵ As a result, what *is* art is always changing, while the

avant-gardistes et traditionalistes : il est entre le risque de l’innovation par les créateurs et l’encouragement à l’innovation par les institutions, entre la transgression des normes et son annulation par l’élargissement de ces normes aux mesures des nouvelles transgressions, entre la provocation artistique et son assimilation officialisée, entre le défi au bon sens et la création de sens, entre la destruction des critères et leur reconstruction, entre la main transgressive des uns et la main intégratrice des autres” (Heinich 1998a:344-45).

²⁵ From the French. My translation. “A l’opposé de ces rappels à l’ordre des normes transgressées, les critiques les plus savantes des professionnels de l’esthétique contestent la validité des transgressions au nom de leur projet même, et non de ce à quoi elles s’opposent. Il ne s’agit plus alors de défendre une certaine tradition contre des innovations excessive, mais de défendre

transgressive paradigm that values artistic dissidence remains the same; the artist transgresses, the supporters present the work, the learned and profane public react, and the two sides argue – or one might say negotiate – the legitimacy of the transgressive gesture. What Heinich calls “authenticity” then is important to how the proposition and reaction are negotiated. As Heinich writes, authenticity is “what holds singularity, what guarantees it and what allows it to play positively on its ambivalence by constituting it as an asset rather than a stigma” (1998a:123).²⁶ While the supporters of the proposition assert the singular originality of a transgressive artistic gesture, the “refusers” of the new art challenge its authenticity as art. Each transgressive gesture then opens an opportunity for redefining not only the values of art, but often the very beliefs and values that shape a particular worldview.

In contrast to Heinich’s sociology of values, Pierre Bourdieu explains the disagreements that challenge a particular worldview as struggles over power. Bourdieu notes how “the field of cultural production,” or the social field in which art is made,

une certain conception de la modernité, voire de l’avant-garde, contre une autre” (Heinich 1998a:229).

²⁶ From the French. My translation. “Ce que l’art contemporain met à l’épreuve, ce n’est donc pas la singularité, dont il ne cesse au contraire de jouer, mais la condition de son accréditation: à savoir l’authenticité. Celle-ci en effet est indispensable à la valorisation du singulier, toujours vulnérable au basculement dans l’insignifiant, le délirant, l’inintéressant. Toute singularité doit, pour être prise et comprise, apparaître authentique : l’authenticité est ce qui fait ‘tenir’ la singularité, ce qui la garantit, ce qui permet de jouer positivement de son ambivalence en la constituant en atout et non pas en stigmaté” (Heinich 1998a:123).

is the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer [or artist] and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer (1993:42).

Bourdieu likens such struggles between the dominant and subordinate fractions to a revolution.²⁷ For Bourdieu, a “revolution” occurs when “the subversive intentions of a fraction of producers” meets “with the expectations of a fraction of the audience” resulting in “a transformation of the relations between the intellectual field and the field of power” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:105). In the artistic field, the subversive fractions are those “challengers,” such as transgressive and dissident artists, “who break the silence of the *doxa* and call into question the unproblematic, taken-for-granted world of the dominant groups” (Bourdieu 1993:83). When a revolution succeeds (that is, when it is authenticated by a powerful fraction of the field), the conventions, practices, and values in the field may be upended, overturned, and redefined. As in Heinich’s paradigmatic explanation, an artistic revolution does not dissolve or destroy what came before; it only ever “succeed[s] in overturning the hierarchy of the field without disturbing the principles on which the field is based” (Bourdieu 1993:83-84). For Bourdieu, the “obligatory transgression” of the avant-garde, or what he has called the “institutionalization of anomie,” instigates an ongoing revolution in the field of art. The “institutionalization of anomie,” or the institution of an absence of rules, means that “no one can claim to be an

²⁷ Bourdieu uses the term “fraction” to denote the many different groups within a recognized class, each of which struggles to take a social position in relation to the dominant class and group (1984:126).

absolute holder of the *nomos* [the rule], even if everyone has claims to the title” (Bourdieu 1993:252). In other words, all artists can make a dissident proposition, but no one alone has the power to impose the dominant definition of what is art and who is an artist.²⁸

It is this revolutionizing capacity of art – that is, its capacity to affect the *doxa* or worldview – which makes contemporary art political. To qualify this assertion and better understand how art and politics work in concert, I turn to Jacques Rancière’s definition of politics. Like Heinich, Rancière also tries to avoid taking a position on who or what is dominant and, instead, explains politics as a process. Rancière proposes that “politics is not primarily the exercise of power or the deciding of common affairs” (2004a:6) but, rather, “consists of calling the social/political, private/public divide into question” (7). Politics is “a *quarrel* [my emphasis] over the perceptible givens of common life [Bourdieu’s *doxa*]” (7) and as such politics “create[s] a stage on which problems can be made visible” (7). The quarrel then activates a “refutation of a situation’s given assumptions” and introduces “previously

²⁸ Nathalie Heinich makes a point of distinguishing her concept of artistic singularity from Bourdieu’s notion of the insitutionalization of anomie. As Heinich explains, “L’art en régime de singularité n’a strictement rien d’‘anémique’ : au contraire, il est parfaitement normé, pour peu du moins qu’on accepte de changer de systèmes normatifs ou, plutôt, d’accepter la coexistence de plusieurs systèmes, au lieu de considérer le régime de communauté comme la norme, face à laquelle il n’y aurait que des exceptions, des irrégularités, des effets d’anomie [Art in the regime of singularity is not strictly anomic: on the contrary, it is perfectly normal, at least in that it accepts systemic change as normal, or rather, accepts the coexistence of several systems in the place of considering the community regime as the norm, against which there would only be some exceptions, some irregularities, and some effects of anomie]” (2005:344).

uncounted objects and subjects” (7). In this way, politics brings unheard and unseen issues to the surface – it makes visible what has not yet been seen.

This latter point is essential to Rancière’s political definition of democracy. Rancière contends that liberal democracy is founded on a common consensus of governance and social values (Rancière [1995] 1998; 2004b). While consensus allows for an operative society, it is also the erasure of contestation. For Rancière, consensus “reduces political difference to police-like homogeneity” (2004a:7). As a result, the regulating laws and beliefs of the consensus institute a norm that always leaves some members of the *demos* unheard and invisible. Thus, while liberal democracy promotes the ideal of equality, it actually results in inequality. For Rancière, equality begins not with the consensus of democracy but with the shared sensible experience of life before any governance or consensus takes place. The consensus divides this sensible experience into what is normal and abnormal, heard and unheard, seen and unseen. For Rancière this is where equality ends and inequality begins (Rancière [1995] 1998; 2004b). Dissidence, then, or what Rancière calls “disagreement,” is necessary for giving voice to the unequal and unheard within any political system. In a liberal democracy, disagreement is essential, because it breaks the “silence of the doxa” (as Bourdieu would put it), challenges the consensus, and ensures that “no one can claim to be an absolute holder of the *nomos*” (Bourdieu 1993:252).

For Rancière, dissensus is also an essential link between art and politics. Based on his re-interpretation of Kantian aesthetics, Rancière proposes that “art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible” (2010:140). With its transgressive and dissident gestures, art may activate a quarrel over what is and is not seen, what is normal and abnormal, what is visible and what is invisible, not only in the artistic field but also, as Heinrich recognizes, in the social field of ordinary values (2004b). As a result, art, like politics, always challenging borders and boundaries. As Rancière notes:

Doing art means displacing art’s borders, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as *the* political. Displacing art’s borders does not mean leaving art, that is making the leap from ‘fiction’ (or ‘representation’) to reality. Practices of art do not provide forms of awareness or rebellious impulses *for* politics. Nor do they take leave of themselves to become forms of collective political action. They contribute to the constitution of a form of commonsense that is ‘polemical’, to a new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable (2010:148-49).

Understood in this way, art and politics create the “polemical” climate for the constant renegotiation of the *doxa*.

As Rancière and others have proposed, dissidence is a necessary component of democracy. For example, political theorist Barbara Falk notes, “in democracies, we need dissent to safeguard and protect our most basic civil liberties, for a litmus test of their subversion remains the extent to which we trade away liberty for enhanced security” (Falk 2008/09:253). According to this view, dissidence is the active expression of the liberal

democratic right to free expression. Dissidence, then, maintains the values of democracy but also ensures that democracy can never be fully defined.

It is at this juncture that art and democracy appear to operate in parallel. Like democracy, the definition of what is and is not art is always challenged and renegotiated through dissidence. As Heinich writes,

one cannot give a substantial definition to contemporary art as it is neither reducible to its use of an image, or its relationship to a concept, or its use of an object: it can only have a structural, relational, or contextual definition (1998a:328).²⁹

Or, as one writer proposed in the special edition of *October* journal on contemporary art, “the most pervasive idea about contemporary art has been that one cannot—indeed should not—have any idea about it” (*October* 2009:46). Dissidence, once recognized and valorized in the contemporary art field, operates then as an active challenge to the conventions of what is and is not art, and through its persistent challenge continually reinforces the liberal-democratic value of free expression.

If the field of contemporary art is to be understood as a space of dissident activity, of free and anomic expression where consensus is always challenged, and as such representative of liberal-democratic ideals, how then do we understand the dissident value of the Chinese dissident artist?

Following the theoretical frame for understanding contemporary art

²⁹ From the French. My translation. “Mais les frontières ainsi mises à l’épreuve ne sont, de ce fait, jamais fixes : ce ne sont pas les mêmes qui sont déplacées d’une proposition artistique à une autre puisque, par définition, elles ont bougé. Aussi ne peut-on donner de définition substantielle à l’art contemporain, qui n’est réductible ni à son usage de l’image, ni à son rapport au concept, ni à son recours aux objets : il n’a de définition que structurelle, relationnelle, contextuelle” (Heinich 1998a:328).

as it has been developed here, an artist is recognized as contemporary by demonstrating his or her singular originality or difference from other artists in the field. As discussed above, this requires the obligatory transgression of artistic, social, and/or political values. The fact that Chinese contemporary artists have been recognized as “contemporary” indicates that they have somehow met this transgressive obligation. At the same time, the recognition of Chinese artists is qualified by their identity as Chinese, a distinction that separates and distinguishes them from Western artists whose national or ethnic identity is rarely named. As Stuart Hall proposes, identities are not essential but are constructed historically, culturally, and politically within discourse (Hall 1996b:168; Hall 1996a). Identities are “points of temporary attachment” (1996a:6) that not only categorize and identify people and things but also represent a certain intersection of meaning. The word “Chinese,” then – as it is understood in the name Chinese contemporary art – is significant for understanding the artistic and political differences that are attributed to Chinese artists as they enter the field of contemporary art.

None of the Chinese artists in this study overtly identify as dissident or demonstrate the kinds of political activities that have brought such significant media attention to Ai Weiwei. Still, the valorization of Ai Weiwei and his work provides an exemplary model for mapping out the artistic and political differences that are often attributed to Chinese artists all the same. First, Ai has been recognized for his artistic difference – that is, for how his

work introduces new approaches, themes, and/or conceptual ideas that challenge the conventional form of contemporary art. Like many Chinese artists, Ai has been recognized for his integration and use of Chinese objects such as vases, architectural screens, and traditional Chinese furniture in his sculptural installations and performances (Lebold Cohen 2011; Kataoka 2012; Merewether 2012). Artistically, these cultural objects introduce a dissident difference to what is typically perceived as Western artistic practice. Their “abnormality” to these conventions is a dissensus that questions the “normality” of what can and cannot be art.

The cultural difference that Ai and other Chinese artists bring to their artistic practice also highlights their identity as ethnically Chinese. Recognition of this identity provides an authenticity that legitimizes the use of certain images and forms, but also, in turn, makes the artist’s identity highly political in the context of the Western art field. As post-colonial theorists have recognized the cultural alterity of artists from outside the Western cultural centres presents a transgressive contrast to the “norm” of the dominant Caucasian Euro-American male artists. As early as the 1960s, artists who belonged to disenfranchised groups within Euro-America were demanding to be seen and heard (Reed 1994; Fisher [1996] 2005). Once recognized, their identity – female, gay, African-American, or Aboriginal – was valorized as a distinguishing feature of their artistic production. As Jean Fisher explains, by the late 70s and 80s there was

a deliberate gender, sex or racial political agenda coming from within the Western system focused on visibility in the form of autobiography:

a 'bearing witness' to an individual experience of the world to point out that the official version of reality was not universal (Fisher [1996] 2005:236).

By 1989, artists from outside the dominant West were also being recognized and validated on the basis of their identity-difference. The 1989 exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*, played an important role in establishing this value in the artistic field as I discuss in Chapter Four. Mediated by the artistic institutions in the West, the artist's identity is then valorized for how it operates as a "transformative alterity," one that Hal Foster proposes acts as a "primary point of subversion of the dominant culture" (1994a:12).

Recognized by the artistic field as politically dissident, identity-difference is then taken up as an artistic asset that distinguishes the singular originality of non-Western artists – including Chinese artists – who are viewed as Other to the dominant cultural paradigm.

Ai Weiwei has also been identified and valorized as a political dissident. Art world agents and popular media have commended Ai for his courageous political challenge to Chinese authorities. Ai has expressed this challenge in direct and indirect ways through both his art and his actions. For example, Ai's response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, as noted above, included very public and non-artistic actions (such as posting information on the internet) in addition to his artwork that very pointedly addressed a specific political issue in China. The art world has also recognized and validated many of Ai's artworks as politically dissident even when they do not have any direct relationship to a politically sensitive issue. For example,

Ai has created several sculptural works, such as *Grapes* (2010), that are constructed from wooden three-legged stools commonly used by Chinese peasants (Ai 2012:76-77). He dismantles the stools and reconfigures them in sculptural groups that make the stools unusable for their original purpose. In another work, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995/2009), Ai smashed an ancient Chinese vase as part of a performance piece (Ai 2012:88-89). While the subject of these works is ambiguous, curators and art historians have often interpreted them in relation to Ai's national identity and how the works appear to challenge the dominant political values in China. Art historian Joan Lebold Cohen, for example, proposes that these works may be "about the dysfunction of the old society in a new world" (2011:89). But, she also proposes, "Ai's real target may be the current culture, the Communist dictatorship that rules China" (98). Curator Charles Merewether is more direct. In a catalogue essay for Ai Weiwei's 2013 solo exhibition, *According to What?*, Merewether writes that Ai Weiwei's practice, especially after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, is

no longer circumscribed by the art world, but is increasingly oriented to and driven by larger issues facing contemporary China – specifically, the exercise of autocratic power, the disappearance of Chinese cultural and material history, the absence of human rights, and the impoverishment of people's lives (2012:23).

By recognizing and validating Ai's work as politically dissident, whether intended as such or not, Lebold Cohen, Merewether, and others effectively transform Ai's political activities and his political difference with the Chinese state into artistic assets that distinguish Ai as a contemporary artist.

As an artist, Ai Weiwei is recognized and valorized as both artistically and politically dissident. His example indicates how these two forms of dissidence often work in concert so that artistic differences might contribute to the recognition of political dissidence, while actual political dissidence – speaking out against a government or institution – may be taken up as an artistic difference. The significance and value of dissidence is then attributed to the artist and his work as a distinguishing feature of his singular originality as an artist. Such attribution, however, mis-recognizes (as Bourdieu would say) the complex game of recognition that has occurred to create the value in the first place. As Heinrich explains in the three-hand game, the artist makes the provocative gesture, but this gesture can only become an artistic value when it is recognized and validated by the agents in the artistic field. The dissident proposition is only understood against the norm or common consensus of the third hand of the game: the critics and the public. Ai's value as a dissident artist then is contingent not only on his artistic works and how they challenge contemporary art practice, but also how his work, words, and identity appear to challenge Western political values. At the same time, Ai is extolled for affirming the liberal-democratic values that differentiate China from the West. As *Time* magazine declared in 2011, Ai Weiwei is a “fierce advocate for democratic reform” (Tharoor 2011). Or, as *ArtReview* asserted, Ai's “work and his words have become catalysts” that provoke political debates about “freedom of expression, nationalism, economic power, the Internet, the rights of the human being” (2011). As a

dissident artist, then, Ai Weiwei presents a contradiction of sorts. On one hand, his work challenges the dominant Western paradigm and, on the other, his art and activities directed at the Chinese state serve to affirm Western political values.

The contradictory values of the Chinese artist as dissident can be understood in relation to the changing global political landscape and to the West's fascination with political dissidents. In the 1970s, just a few years before Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and a decade before the advent of Chinese contemporary art, "a galaxy of Soviet dissidents – Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, Bukovskii, Orlov, and Shcharanskii – became household names" (Horvath 2007:880). As Robert Horvath explains, the dissidents' entry or "escape" into the West was highly publicized in the media and "magnified by the spotlight of superpower relations" (2007:880). As stories of persecution, imprisonment, and torture emerged, the dissident Soviet writer or intellectual was embraced by Western nations as a supporter and advocate of liberal-democratic values. As Horvath explains

the persona of 'the dissident' gradually supplanted the revolutionary, the guerrilla and the terrorist as an ideal advocate of human liberation in the imaginations of a coterie of anti-totalitarian thinkers (2007:882).

Crossing the boundary of the totalitarian state and entering the space of the "free" and democratic West, the political dissident's defection was celebrated as an affirmation of, rather than a challenge to, Western liberal democracy.

A similar transformation occurred with Chinese dissidents in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. Broadcast internationally in

what Daniel Vukovich has called the “first and perhaps the most enduring ‘live’ global media event” (2012:27), the protests in Beijing in the Spring of 1989 signaled to the West an “awakening” China (Jones 2001:111), a China that desired not only a modern economy but also a Western-style liberal democracy (Vukovich 2012).³⁰ The fall of the Berlin Wall and European communism a few months later only strengthened the view that liberal

³⁰ Jones points out that the idea of an “awakening” China dates back to the 19th century (2001:111). Beginning in the 16th century, Europe admired China as a parallel civilization, one that was both similar and different (Gregory 2002:1-5). As Jonathan Spence has outlined, it was China’s “industry,” governance, “philosophical richness of its cultural traditions, and the strength of its rulers” (Spence 1990:132) that attracted European leaders and intellectuals. As Europe industrialized and modernized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the West adopted a more “disparaging view” of China, seeing it as “an outmoded empire that failed to come to terms with the modern world” (Mungello 2005:1). These changing perceptions of China parallel the development of the artistic avant-garde in Europe. Like the avant-garde, these perceptions originate in the French Enlightenment and the revolutionary period that moved Europe from its own autocratic governance to a democratic political system. Thus, as Europe “modernized,” politically and industrially, China appeared to be “retrogressing” and demonstrating “no notion of progress” (Spence 1990:134). The idea of “awakening” then refers to the potential the West sees in China to “awake” to the civilizing values of modern liberal democracy.

In this context, Vukovich argues that the Tiananmen Square incident has been misread by Western academics as an “awakening” China, that is, a sign that the people of China want to embrace liberal democracy. As he writes, “Tiananmen as the truth of civil society *post-Mao* has less to do with China than with the self-image of the West and its ‘leadership’” (2012:25), that is, with the desires of the West to see China transition from an authoritarian regime to a liberal-democratic state. Vukovich is critical of this view and argues that it represents what he calls a Neo-Orientalism. This is not the place to enter into a full discussion of Vukovich’s theory except to say that his argument about Western perceptions and a Neo-Orientalism finds some affirmation in how Chinese contemporary art was received and valued after 1989, as I discuss below and in the following chapters.

democracy would ultimately triumph not only in Eastern Europe but also worldwide. As Paul Blokker proposes, “the dramatic changes of 1989 have been widely understood as the confirmation of Western, liberal democracy as the ultimate model of the modern polity” (2011:219). Beijing’s violent response to the Tiananmen Square protests, however, demonstrated the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) resistance to this path. Media reports of imprisonments, censorship, and human rights violations in the months and years following 1989 have only confirmed and strengthened the Western belief that Chinese citizens desire a transition to liberal democracy. The Chinese dissident then, like the Soviet dissident before him, has come to represent in the West the “hope” that the values of liberal democracy might one day take hold in China. Barbara Falk expresses this sentiment when she explains, “in authoritarian states the existence of dissent and the activism of dissidents together hold out one of the only real hopes of nonviolent change and political evolution” (2008/09:253). The value of outspoken Chinese dissidents such as Ai Weiwei, Liu Xiaobo, and Chen Guangcheng is then twofold: they are valued for their vocal opposition to the authoritarian state within China *and*, by this same gesture, for their advocacy of liberal-democratic ideals. Thus the Chinese dissident, like the Soviet dissident before him, has come to represent both democracy in action and the very limits of democracy.

The Chinese artist *as dissident*, recognized through his art and identity, is valorized then for both the artistic and political dimension of his

dissident difference. Like the original avant-garde of the nineteenth century, he challenges what is and is not art, and is equally championed as an advocate of social reform and change. The valorization of these dissident attributes is played out in the three-hand game of contemporary art: the artist initiates a provocation through his work, the agents and institutions in the field mediate the value of the dissident gesture, and the public, familiar with the artistic and political values of the liberal-democratic West, react. The provocative gesture of the Chinese artist as dissident plays with and against values that imagine a repressive China as the political Other to liberal democracy and the Chinese artist as dissident as a hopeful harbinger of an awakening China.

In the following chapters, I trace the attribution and valorization of dissidence – artistic and political – in relation to the artists in this study as they transitioned between China and France. None of these artists has been as politically vocal as Ai Weiwei or claims to be a political dissident. Like Ai Weiwei, however, they have all been recognized and valorized as Chinese contemporary artists through the value of dissidence. In other words, they have been “interpellated” (Hall 1996a:6) into the identity and discourses that have constructed Chinese contemporary art in the West. By considering the individual transitions of the artists, their relationships in the field, the mediating discourses, and the different events that have affected how the West understands China, I have tried to trace the process of attribution and

valorization that has so often “hailed” (Hall 1996a:6) Chinese artists into the role of the Chinese artist as dissident.

Chapter Two

An Artistic Event: The *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*

As the people involved in the handgun incident at the opening of China/Avant-Garde, we believe this to be a purely artistic event.

Artists Xiao Lu and Tang Song, quoted by Hang and Cao ([1989] 2010:126).

Under a giant, prophetic “no U-turn” sign, China’s avant-garde artists finally realized their dream when they opened their first national exhibition in the China Art Gallery¹ in Beijing on February 5, 1989. *Zhongguo xiandai yishu zhan*, or *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* as it was translated in English, featured nearly 300 works by 186 artists from across the country, giving the exhibit a scale and scope equivalent to the large government-sponsored socialist-realist exhibits that would usually fill the museum (Gao 1999:6). Even though the show lasted barely seven days, the exhibit achieved its purpose in having the new avant-garde art recognized in the most prestigious and important official art space in China. After years of struggle, this one exhibit gave China’s avant-garde artists the platform they needed to assert their dissident difference, confirm their authenticity, and affirm their legitimate place in the Chinese artistic field. The “handgun incident,” referred to by artists Xiao Lu and Tang Song in the quote above (and discussed below), the subsequent early closure of the exhibit by the

¹ The China Art Gallery in Beijing is China’s most important national museum of art. It is now renamed the National Art Museum of China, or NAMOC.

authorities, and the attention these two situations gained in Western media all contributed to making this exhibit an “artistic event.” As Li Xianting put it in 1989, just after the closing of the show, “no matter how we evaluate *China/Avant-Garde*, it was a milestone for Chinese art, one that advanced new art to another level and endured great hardship to be a pioneer” ([1989]2010:120).

As Li predicted, *China/Avant-Garde* is now cited as a significant “milestone” in Chinese contemporary art. It is recognized in both China and the West as the first “official” exhibition of Chinese contemporary art in China. In this chapter I revisit this seminal event in order to unravel the role of dissidence – artistic and political – in the production and recognition of Chinese contemporary art just before the Tiananmen Square incident and before the artists in this study were recognized in the West. Drawing on personal interviews with the subject artists, I consider how and why young artists in the 1980s in China took up what were recognized as unapproved Western art practices – such as abstract painting, collage, found object sculpture, installation, video art and performance – as a way of distinguishing themselves from officially supported artistic practices in the highly regulated artistic field at the time. Following Bourdieu’s framework, the interviews consider how different forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) contributed to establishing the artists’ careers in China, and how, within this context, the artists differentiated themselves through their artistic experiments with Western art practices. I then consider how the dissident

difference of these experimental art practices was mediated and valorized by the organizers of the *China/Avant-garde* exhibit, resulting in the highly successful presentation of the exhibit as an “artistic event.” As Nathalie Heinich explains, an artistic event “marks a date” that is notable and significant. It is an event that, by its significance at the time, “affects people” and “generates certain discourses” (2000:166). An artistic event is constructed through the participation of numerous actors – the artists who present the transgressive work, the art world agents who mediate the transgression, and the public or officials who react to the transgressive gesture. Thus, like a singular artwork, artistic events are recognized and objectivized through a dialectical transition of “transgression, reaction, and integration” (Heinich 1998a:19-51). With its provocative avant-garde gesture presented in the heart of China’s power centre in Beijing, *China/Avant-Garde* can be understood as a singular artistic event that not only initiated a contemporary art movement in China, but also introduced the dissident capacity of Chinese contemporary art to the West.

The *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit was, from its inception, a challenge to produce. The “pioneers” of the avant-garde were all young artists and art historians who came of age between 1967 and 1977.² Not only did they grow

² In this chapter I focus on the artistic development in China from 1985 to 1989 with the primary aim of providing an historical background for understanding the contemporary artistic practices of the artists in this study. As Julia Andrews and others have noted, the first artistic avant-garde movement in China dates back to the 1920s when artists travelled to Japan and France to study Western modern art (Andrews 1998; Birnie Danzker et al 2005; Gao 2011; Zhu 2009). This early art movement and the avant-garde

up during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution, they also only knew the strictly-regulated artistic practices of the Communist regime. Shortly after solidifying its power in 1950, the CCP adopted a Soviet model for regulating all forms of artistic and cultural production (Croizier 1999:484). Under this mandate, there was no room for artistic or economic autonomy, and all art was to serve a socialist agenda. All artists had to join, or at least participate in, the functions of the China Artists Association (*zhongguo meishujia xiehui*), an organization authorized and funded by the state. All art was produced and paid for by the state according to legislated themes, images, and styles, and all artists were trained according to the same artistic guidelines. With no independent exhibition venues, no alternate markets, and little tolerance for expressive experiments, artists had little choice but to conform to these regulations (Andrews 1994; Croizier 1999). As Wang Du stated in his interview for this study, “China did not have artists, did not produce art. There was no profession for the so-called artist. Everybody had work and you were either a teacher or did propaganda art or worked for the state.” Artistic production, in other words, was a career rather

movements after 1979 each follow their own distinct artistic paths, and differ artistically from the development of the avant-garde in Europe. What they do share is how the artists used differentiating artistic practices to challenge the expected artistic norms of their respective fields. The post-1979 avant-garde may also be compared to the European experience in that Chinese artists were confronted by a monolithic art institution managed by the state – much like the French Academy – that discouraged, rather than encouraged, transgressive artistic practices.

than a vocation, one that was defined and regulated by the state and its approved institutions.³

It was only after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the initiation of Deng Xiaoping's cultural and economic reforms in the late 1970s that the circumstances in the field began to change. China had opened to the rest of the world, and new influences and ideas flooded in from the West. Inspired by what they learned, young artists began experimenting with different techniques derived from Western art. Abstract painting (which was once banned), nudes (also banned), installation art, found-object sculpture, and performance art were all considered to be daring and radical for the time. The China Artists Association tried to accommodate these changes and encouraged artists to modernize (Shao 2003). But, as Martina Köppel-Yang has pointed out, the Association's mandate remained "vague" and subject to a fluctuating political climate that sometimes turned against Western influences (2003:45).⁴ Although no longer prohibited, innovative creative approaches were looked upon with suspicion and often excluded from the official exhibits that continued to be controlled and financed by the China Artists Association. And, while artists were permitted to sell their work independently of their work units and organize their own "unofficial" exhibits, there were few opportunities to gain significant public recognition

³ Under the institutionalized patronage of the state, Richard Kraus proposes that Chinese artists had far better economic prospects than they had prior to the revolution, when a free market for art prevailed (2004:37-72).

⁴ For example, the Anti-Spiritual Pollution (1983) and Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization (1987) campaigns.

or to develop a strong independent art market (Andrews 1995; Croizier 1999; Köppel-Yang 2003). With these challenges, avant-garde artists had little power to substantially contribute to, let alone radically influence, the official artistic field. Obtaining a national exhibit then, especially one in the China Art Gallery, was a major achievement. As Gao Minglu states, “once an individual artist has a show in the National Gallery it means that his or her art position has been accepted by the official, national highest art authority” (1999:90).

For this study, I followed the lives and careers of nine artists, four of whom took part in *China/Avant-Garde*: Shen Yuan, Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, and Wang Du. Wang Keping, Chen Zhen, Ru Xiaofan, and Yan Pei-Ming did not participate in the exhibition, as they had moved to France several years before 1989. Du Zhenjun (b. 1961), the youngest in this study, was still in China but did not participate in the exhibition. Still, all of the artists in this study, except Wang Keping, who was born in 1949, are considered to be part of what Gao Minglu has called the '85 Movement (Gao 1999), the generation of young artists who practiced Western-style art between 1985 and 1989. Gao Minglu, who coined the term in 1986, notes that the movement began after the government renewed its “official support for intellectual interchange with the West” at the beginning of 1985 (2011:101). It is these artists, along with the slightly older generation that includes Wang Keping, to whom I refer here as “avant-garde” artists. I use the term “avant-garde” for two reasons. First, it is a term used by this

generation of artists to refer to their own work as I discuss below. Second, in keeping with my definition in the previous chapter, the artists, like the original European avant-garde, used their art to challenge the conventional artistic boundaries set by Chinese institutions.

Eight of the nine artists in the study took part in qualitative interviews for this project.⁵ The first part of the lengthy personal interviews was designed to understand the artists' lives in China, and how cultural and social capital contributed to their artistic careers before they immigrated to France (Appendix I). Cultural capital includes how family or, as is often the case in China at this time, the government, supported their artistic careers through encouragement and education. Social capital refers to the supportive relationships an artist has with influential artists, teachers, curators, and others who have somehow aided the artist in developing a career (Bourdieu 1986). The interview questions focused on family background, artistic education, employment, and exhibition records, but I was especially interested in learning how the artists were introduced to Western art practices, how the artists expressed these practices in their work, and why they took up these practices. These interviews allowed me then to understand how and why the artists, as individuals, worked to differentiate themselves and thus contribute to the making of *China/Avant-Garde* as an artistic event. Furthermore, their motivations, art-making, and position-taking have all brought the actions of the key organizers of *China/Avant-*

⁵ Yan Pei-Ming was not interviewed. Chen Zhen's interview was completed by his widow, Xu Min.

Garde into the foreground, along with the discourses that have been used to mediate the transgressive nature of the exhibit.

As my interviews and documentary research revealed, all of the artists in this study are from the generation that experienced the Cultural Revolution and the Red Guard movement (Zhou and Hou 1999; Zang 2000). Other than Wang Keping, they were all born after the 1949 revolution, were the children of the Communist cadre, and only knew China under communism. They were in grade school at the start of the Cultural Revolution and young adults during the Reform years. They are also the first generation of students to return to the universities after they reopened at the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1978 (Köppel-Yang 2003:48). Seven of the artists in this study attended university art programs, and five of these attended specialized art academies such as the Central Academy of Art in Beijing and the Zhejiang Academy of Art (now China Academy of Art) in Hangzhou.⁶ Still, as the artists indicated in my interviews, their artistic education followed the conventional art school curriculum that had been established in the 1950s. In specialized schools and programs, students had the option of majoring in Chinese traditional painting, calligraphy, or

⁶ Yan Pei-Ming and Wang Keping developed their art education differently. Yan Pei-Ming applied to the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts but failed the entrance exam (Nuridsany 2004:47). He then completed all of his post-secondary art studies in France. Wang Keping is the only subject who did not enroll in post-secondary studies, which is not unusual considering his age. Born in 1949, he would have been too old to enroll in university when they reopened after the Cultural Revolution. Wang was self-taught, whereas 98 percent of the '85 Movement artists attended university art programs (Wang Keping 2008; Liao Wen 1993: LII).

Western art practices. Western art practices were understood as oil painting and sculpture with a focus on rendering, very realistically, images from nature. Throughout the 1980s, according to Köppel-Yang, some schools such as the Central Academy in Beijing or the Zhejiang Academy did allow limited changes in curriculum, and some teachers encouraged more artistic innovation (2003:49). The artists in this study, however, found that there was no official instruction in contemporary Western artistic practices such as abstract painting, performance, installation, or video art in the institutions they attended.

Until 1988, all students who successfully completed post-secondary art studies, including those in this study, were assigned employment in an art-related position. After the Cultural Revolution, there was a huge demand for teachers at all levels, so there was no shortage of educational positions. Many students who attained a Master's degree were assigned professorships (Zang 2000:108).⁷ No matter where they were assigned, however, the subjects of my study noted how they were expected to teach the same prescribed curriculum they had learned in their studies. All of the artists in this study emphasized that they had no choice as to where they ended up. Huang Yong Ping, for example, who graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Art in Hangzhou, was sent to Xiamen, where he was assigned to teach middle school. This was not a premier position, but as he remarked in our interview,

⁷ Artists, like other workers, were assigned a work unit. Beginning in 1988, however, the government stopped assigning jobs and graduates were expected to find their own work (Zang 2000:108).

“there was no choice, as the government assigned you a job.” In this study, all of the artists – except Wang Keping, who was self-taught, and Yan Pei-Ming, who completed his academic training in France – were fully employed in teaching positions prior to their emigration to the West. This indicates that despite the prescribed pedagogy and lack of choice, each of the artists who had studied in China acquired the necessary cultural and social capital for a successful artistic career within the official parameters of art education in China at the time.⁸

Considering this background, the artists of the '85 Movement had a strong system to react against, one that was not only officiated by the China Artists Association but also by the academies where they studied and later worked. In the interviews conducted for this study, all of the artists indicated how taking up Western art practices allowed them to distinguish themselves artistically and push against the restraints of the official art mandate. All of the artists also indicated that they were first introduced to Western artistic practices at university, but not as part of their formal studies. Prior to attending university the artists had little or no knowledge of Western art practices except as a painting style associated with Soviet art. During most of

⁸ Chen Zhen was assigned a teaching position in the Shanghai Theatre Institute, Yang Jiechang became a professor in the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art, and Du Zhenjun taught Chinese painting at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Art. Huang Yong Ping was assigned to teach art in a middle school in Xiamen, Fujian, while Shen Yuan returned to her hometown, Fuzhou, Fujian, where she taught drawing at a normal college for 10 years. Wang Du, who did not attain a Master's degree, taught drawing at an architectural school in Guangzhou. Ru Xiaofan, who had majored in art education, was also given a middle school assignment in Nanjing.

their formative years, Western books and art had been banned or hidden away. At university the combination of access to books and exchanges with other students, teachers, and foreigners introduced a whole new repertoire of artistic ideas and approaches. As Shen Yuan described in our interview,

the universities were a very special environment. Although I studied Chinese painting, there were lots of different ideas, and the exchange of ideas between different departments. The students got together but not the teachers. The teachers were still very traditional.

At Guangzhou Academy of Art, Yang Jiechang related how some teachers were more receptive to these new practices. In our interview, Yang recalls his teachers visiting Western art exhibits in Hong Kong, making copies of what they saw, and returning to share these images and experiences with their students. Books were also donated by people from Hong Kong, including current works on philosophy and literature. Yang claims, “I read everything because there was not much choice. Whatever they brought, I read. I didn’t care.” Similarly, Ru Xiaofan, who attended Nanjing University, noted how foreign students he met introduced him to Western art, showing him exhibition catalogues and books they had brought from their home countries. Many artists were also influenced by Western philosophy, sociology, psychology, and fiction, as Huang Yong Ping’s experience demonstrates. Living in Xiamen, Fujian, Huang had access to books from Taiwan, many of them on art and philosophy current in the West in the 1980s. He was familiar with Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida, as well as with artists like John Cage, Joseph Beuys, and Joseph Kosuth. As he noted in our interview, all of these sources had a strong

influence on his conceptual approach to art. Still, as Wang Du related in our interview, the experience of Western art for most artists was very dated. Only a few exhibits of Western art came to China at this time and as Wang Du explains: “everything was very traditional, like French eighteenth century exhibits [...] No modern or postmodern art exhibits. It was all very old.”

One foreign exhibit that does appear to have had a considerable impact on the young artists – even though none of the subjects in this study actually saw it – was Robert Rauschenberg’s self-sponsored *ROCI* (*Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange*) exhibit, held in Beijing in 1985 (Rauschenberg 1991).⁹ *ROCI* was the first and only Western contemporary art exhibit to be shown in China during this period, and the exhibit had a profound effect on artists across the country (Ho Hing-Kay 1993:IX; Yi Ying 1993:XLIV; Köppel-Yang 2003:20). Most artists, like the ones in this study, only heard about the exhibit through word of mouth, or in one of China’s many *huabao* or art magazines. Magazines such as *Shijie meishu* (*World Art*), *Meishu* (*Art*) and *Zhongguo meishu bao* (*China Art Magazine*) often reproduced texts and images of Western art and featured articles on the few exhibitions of Western art that came to China (Köppel-Yang 2003:52-54). They served as an important method of communication and source of information for all artists. Yang Jiechang, who lived in Guangzhou, told me he

⁹ The exhibit was held in the China Art Gallery and ran from November 15 to December 5, 1985. Donald Saff, who accompanied Rauschenberg during his time in China, noted an attendance figure of 300,000 (Rauschenberg 1991:161). See excerpts from Beijing critics’ responses to the Rauschenberg show in Wu Hung’s anthology (Wu 2010:42-45).

was introduced to the *ROCI* exhibit in this way. Martina Köppel-Yang, a German student who was studying at the Central Academy of Art in Beijing at the time, relates the extraordinary impact of the exhibit on artists such as Yang:

The Chinese public crowded around the works of the American artist, staring dumbfounded at his series *Cabal American Zephyr*, his *Venetian Series* and others. The cultural discrepancy between Rauschenberg's art and the Chinese environment was extreme. It seemed to be insurmountable. At the time, I had no idea that this exhibition and the influence of American pop art should be a decisive factor in the development of contemporary Chinese art. Artists and art critics, in their works and texts, made repeated reference to Rauschenberg, even if they had not visited this exhibition. Accustomed to studying the masterworks of Western art merely from reproductions, many of the artists drew inspiration from illustrations published in the thin brochure that accompanied the exhibition (Köppel-Yang 2003:20).

The most visually anomic feature of Rauschenberg's work was his use of collage in both his sculptures and works on paper. In his two-dimensional work, Rauschenberg mixed various images from public media, magazines, and other print sources to produce seemingly chaotic abstract images. His sculptural work was equally unconventional, with a mix of industrial scraps and disparate objects combined to form new objects that did not have any apparent purpose or narrative (Rauschenberg 1991). For a public familiar with high realism and the literal representations of socialist realist art, Rauschenberg's art was both visually and conceptually challenging. For artists, Rauschenberg's use of collage, popular images, and found materials introduced new artistic possibilities for radically distinguishing their work.

With this limited, second-hand knowledge of Western art practices, the artists in this study demonstrated their singular difference by creating work that deliberately challenged the conventions of both Chinese ink painting and the academies' definition of Western art. Du Zhenjun, Yang Jiechang, and Shen Yuan, for example, informed me that they had all studied Chinese painting, but each explored artistic methods that pushed the boundaries of this traditional practice, including using ideas drawn from Rauschenberg's work. Shen Yuan tried collage and, later, found-object sculpture, while Du Zhenjun used ink and oils to create abstract paintings. Yang Jiechang experimented with collage and making large abstract ink paintings very much like Western abstract modernism. As Yang recalled in our interview, "I was interested in traditional Chinese flower and landscape painting. For some of my ideas I used paintings by Xu Wei, a Ming Dynasty master. I just used the detail to make a big abstract form." It wasn't until Yang arrived in Europe that he realized how similar this approach was to the work of American Abstract Expressionists such as Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell. Wang Du studied sculpture but also made abstract paintings and experimented with performance art. He told me that in 1986 even though he had never seen such an art form, he produced a performance piece where he directed the movements of a group of people, all dressed in white, in a prepared exhibition space (Voltz 2004:155-56). Rather than static sculpture, he said he wanted to "create art through action and movement," and thus envisioned these figures as moving objects in space. Huang Yong

Ping, who had studied oil painting, was also making abstract paintings, but with a conceptual difference. As he informed me, he was inspired by his readings about Marcel Duchamp and the Dada movement in Europe. Using a roulette wheel marked with *I Ching* characters, different colors, and rather cryptic instructions on form and shape, he turned the wheel and let it decide how he would paint (Hou 2005:13). Chen Zhen, in the meantime, had majored in stage set design but had also studied Western painting. His widow, Xu Min, explained in our interview that he traveled to Tibet, where he documented his journey through a series of oil paintings on the theme of life and death. He created abstract images reminiscent of American color field painting to represent his ideas. All of these experiments, while not especially radical at the time in the West, challenged the type of practices these artists had studied in China and allowed them to demonstrate their artistic difference and singularity.

All of the artists in this study noted how experimental art practices were not taught or encouraged in the university art programs. And while none of their practices can be construed as overt political statements, they were, all the same, provocative in the context of the regulated artistic environment in China in the 1980s. This is demonstrated in how the artists had to work around the system in order to create and exhibit such transgressive work. As Ru Xiaofan told me, "I studied realist painting at school and abstract in my spare time." None of the artists had a dedicated studio and had to conduct their art making in their small rooms or

residences. And, like most artists of their generation, the artists exhibited their experimental works in small independent shows outside their work or school environment, often in their homes, outdoors, or in commercial spaces to an audience comprised primarily of friends, fellow artists, students, and a few foreigners (Gao 2005:64-67; dal Lago [1992] 1993). Demonstrating artistic differences, however, had its consequences, as Shen Yuan explained in our interview: "I studied Chinese painting but I was always open to new ideas. I tried constructivism and collage, but when I did my marks were always low." Similarly, Yang Jiechang and Ru Xiaofan both claim that their graduation pieces were deemed too abstract and that this almost jeopardized their graduation. Even after the artists graduated and moved into professional careers, their artistic practices tended to conflict with conventional expectations. As Du Zhenjun explained in our interview, "the boundary was very clear. In the classroom you could only teach traditional methods. If you did not follow this regulation there would be trouble."

Still, despite these consequences, the artists persisted in asserting their difference and were not unaware of how their artistic experiments served as a provocation. Western art practices offered the artists the opportunity to break from the stultifying confines of their conventional training and work requirements. They were able to distinguish themselves from their colleagues and other artists, even if that singular distinction was only noted within a small circle of peers. As Wang Du explained in our interview:

in Chinese schools they want everybody to just follow, but I wanted to experiment with something new. When I went back to school, I found some of the teachers weren't really very good, so I just went my own way. Of course, that drew attention to me.

Such attention created jealousy among colleagues but engendered respect from the younger generation of students, as Yang Jiechang's comments in our interview demonstrate:

Very few artists and very few teachers want to learn something new. They don't like changing [artistically] because changing means they might lose their job [laughs]. I was a very good teacher. The other teachers didn't like me very much, but the students loved me. I like to change [...] and the students really want to do something, want to change and learn something [...] In the end, the people [other teachers] were jealous of me.

Even if unacknowledged by the "official" art field, the artists' transgressive practices allowed them to distinguish themselves and demonstrate an artistic and dissident difference.

For the artists in this study, as well as the many young artists across the country, taking up Western artistic practices was not just an innocent experimentation with Western art-historical tropes, as Wu Hung once tried to argue (Wu 1999:12-16). Rather, it was a more complex gesture that represented a desire for change within China and for the recognition of China's contemporaneity outside of China. As Julia Andrews and Gao Minglu write, the art movements, especially between 1985 and 1989, were designed as a "challenge to the power and aesthetics of a self-perpetuating official establishment by younger and more outward-looking artists and critics" (1995:222). An avant-garde practice influenced by the artists' understanding of Western precedents was meant then to disrupt and disturb not only

artistic convention, but also the cultural and political practices that restrained the younger generation's efforts to be recognized in the world at large.

The desire for change in China expressed by young artists can be understood in the context of the "cultural fever" (*wenhuare*) that took over China throughout the 1980s (Wang Jing 1996). After "opening up" in the late 1970s, Western popular culture such as blue jeans, rock and roll, and long hair were adopted by the younger generation as a way to push for modernization while pushing back at the stultifying official culture. The CCP recognized the need to look to the West for new ways of developing the economy, technology, and industry, but also feared what Westernization might bring (Hughes 2006:41). As Wang Jing notes, the modernization of China established a conflict between "the desire to look the same (hence the catching up with 'authentic modernism') and the desire to look different (the soul searching for the 'Chinese identity')" (1996:169). Occidentalism then presented a conflicting image. Chen Xiaomei notes that there was an official and unofficial idealization of the West (1992). Officially, the CCP continued to condemn Western practices, even as they encouraged copying them in other instances. At the same time, an unofficial Occidentalism was taken up by citizens as a way to counter "official" condemnation of all things Western. Chen uses the example of the controversial television series *He Shang*, or *River Elegy*, which was broadcast on Chinese television in 1988. The six-part documentary used the Yellow River, with its long, winding path to the sea, as

a metaphor for how China had been held back by tradition and persistent backwardness despite its long history as a highly developed civilization. The film suggests that rather than using and developing its own innovations, China remained hidden behind the Great Wall, leaving all the progress to the West. The final episode exhorted the Chinese people to move beyond the muddy confluence of the Yellow River and join the “blue sea” of modernization or Westernization (Chen & Deng 1995:42, 69-70).¹⁰ Chen proposes that *He Shang* is

‘a means of self-definition’ against the status quo in the guise of Occidentalism. Its use of Occidentalism is thus a self-conscious subversion of the centrality of the official culture by moving into the very center of its own discourse a redefined and re-presented Western Other (1992:709).

Similarly, the Western artistic practices of the '85 Movement can be understood as a “self-conscious subversion” directed at official culture. As Liao Wen, the former editor of *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo Meishu Bao*) wrote in 1993, in one of the first catalogue essays on Chinese contemporary art,

the only defense the [avant-garde] artists had against the forces of convention and orthodoxy was modern Western culture. And we should not forget that it was specifically as a weapon in this struggle with establishment forces that Western culture served its purposes (1993:LIV).

Or, as art historian and critic Yi Ying wrote in a 1989 issue of *Meishu (Art)*, the new art in China

¹⁰ Excerpts from the series can be viewed with English subtitles on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39j4ViRxcS8>.

was a by-product of the intellectual liberation movement and a method borrowed from Western modernism. It was used as a weapon against the bulwark of traditional artistic doctrines and it was adopted as a barometer for testing the openness of a society ([1989] 2010:128).

Western art practices offered the young artists new and challenging options, not as an emulation of the West, but as “weapons” for reshaping the limits that defined their social and artistic lives. As a curator and art historian, Gao Minglu has contributed extensively to foregrounding a reading of Chinese contemporary art as artistically and politically dissident.¹¹ As Gao defines

¹¹ Gao Minglu has published extensively on Chinese contemporary art and has been instrumental in coining the term '85 Movement. Still, his views on the relationship between Chinese contemporary art and Western art, and his interpretation of the avant-garde in China, are not always in agreement with others (See for example Gao 2008; Wu 2008). Such disagreements as I have tried to demonstrate in Chapter One (and which I discuss further in the conclusion of this study) are part of the struggle over the definition of what is and is not art in a particular artistic field. In the 1990s, for example, literary theorists in China and the West initiated a discussion about whether Chinese art and literature should be considered modern or post-modern (See Arac 1997a; 1997b; Dirlik and Zhang 1997; Wang Ning 1997a; 1997b; Lu 1997). More recently, British cultural theorist Paul Gladston has challenged the theoretical underpinnings of Gao Minglu's views on Chinese contemporary art (Gladston 2010a; 2010b; 2014) arguing that Gao takes an “exceptionalist” view of Chinese contemporary art, one that “asserts that contemporary Chinese art has been shaped in relation to experiences and representations of modernity within the PRC that differ markedly from those associated with modernist and postmodernist art in the West” (2010:3). As Gladston would have it, there is a much greater influence and relationship between Chinese artistic development and Western art practices than Gao cares to admit. As with Heinich's position on the French contemporary art crisis, these disagreements do not detract from my argument about how the recognition of singularity and dissidence contribute to the valorization of Chinese contemporary art. In his writing, as the quote above indicates, Gao has supported the idea that Chinese artists took up Western art practices as a form of dissent meant to challenge the conditions in their artistic field. It is this act of differentiation that was, in turn, recognized and valorized in the West as an artistic asset that distinguishes Chinese contemporary art.

them, the '85 Movement artists are “openly antagonistic to official culture” in that

they champion individualism, freedom of expression, and a radical overhaul of aesthetic concepts and forms; they reject both Chinese traditional art and Socialist Realism, deploying instead Western modern and postmodern styles, such as surrealism, Dada, pop, and conceptual art (2005:371).

Western artistic practices, like wearing Western clothes or listening to rock music, allowed the artists to express their desire for a modern China. At the same time, this Occidentalist imaginary was suffused with liberal-democratic ideals. By taking up China's Other as a weapon to challenge the social restraints imposed by the state, artists were also demonstrating a desire for “intellectual liberation” and “freedom of expression.”

The dissident and subversive gestures of China's avant-garde artists were much more obvious and powerful when wielded by a group of artists working together, as the organizers of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit appear to have recognized. In his quantitative study of the artistic field in China in the 1980s, sociologist Tong Dian has calculated that there were at least 79 art groups across China that formed to support the new art between 1982 to 1986 ([1991] 2010:75). Julia Andrews and Gao Minglu (1995) point out that groups served two primary purposes:

The first was defensive. The dangers of a solitary artist creating avant-garde art, and thus attacking society, or even criticizing the art establishment, are obvious. In the face of past governmental suppression, the artists saw the need to form a stronger united force (1995:237).

Second, the group gave “value” to the individual artist, bolstering his or her confidence to “collectively overcome any failure” (Andrews and Gao 1995:237). The artists of this generation had already witnessed the effectiveness of group action throughout their youth. During the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guard initiated aggressive actions or movements (*yundong*) against the Four Olds.¹² The Red Guards’ manifesto of sorts, painted on a big character poster in 1966, sounds strikingly similar to manifestos issued by the modern European avant-garde:

We are the critics of the old world. We want to criticize, to smash all old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. All the barbershops, tailors, photo studios, and old bookshops, etc., that served the bourgeoisie... None of them can be excluded. What we do is to overthrow this whole old world!” (quoted in Jiang 2007:3).

Wu Hung has suggested the artists of the 1980s, some of whom had taken part in Red Guard activities, may have been inspired by this youth movement (2008b:294-95). As Wu notes, some of the art groups called their activities “*yundong*,” and such collective efforts helped to “galvanize” and “unify” the artists “into an organized ‘movement’” (2008b:295). Like the Red Guard *yundong*, group formation then gave artists a common identity, a louder

¹² The Red Guard was a youth corps that initiated and led the Cultural Revolution, beginning in 1966 and ending in 1976. Following the publication of *Wuyiliu Tongzhi* (or May the 16th Circular) in the *People’s Daily*, they set out to eliminate all counter-revolutionary elements, or the “Four Olds”: “old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits of the exploiting classes” (quoted in Jiang 2007: 3). The primary target of this assault was the educated middle class, the class that had, even after the revolution, retained a sense of value for the Four Olds. Schools and universities were closed, books and cultural artifacts were burned, teachers and other professionals were imprisoned, publically criticized, and humiliated, educated young people were sent to the countryside to live with the peasants, and thousands of people were killed or starved.

voice, and greater strength for asserting their provocative and dissident gestures.¹³

Three artists in this study – Wang Keping, Wang Du, and Huang Yong Ping – took an active part in prominent avant-garde groups. Wang Keping’s experience with the Stars exemplifies how group formation successfully distinguished the artists through transgression and reaction. *Xingxing*, or the Stars (1979-1981), was the first notable avant-garde art group to be recognized in China and abroad, and Wang Keping was a founding member and spokesperson. The Stars made their artistic and political statement primarily by adopting artistic approaches, such as abstraction and nude painting, that had been banned since the 1950s. As Martina Köppel-Yang notes, the Stars “distinguished themselves rather through their novelty and their politically explosive nature than through artistic quality” (2003:59). On September 27, 1979, when their petition for an exhibition in the China Art Gallery was rejected, they secretly orchestrated an exhibit in a park outside the museum. On a poster they proclaimed their right to free and individual expression: “Our paintings contain all sorts of expressions, and these expressions speak to our own individual ideals” (Wu 2010:7). Wang Keping’s semi-abstract wood sculptures were by far the most politically

¹³ The affect of the Cultural Revolution and Red Guard activities on the '85 Movement artists is the subject of Jiehong Jiang’s anthology. Individual essays consider such topics as the relationship between text in Chinese contemporary art and the big character posters of the Red Guard, the iconographic image of Mao in contemporary Chinese painting, and how performance works recall the many bizarre and traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution (Jiang 2007).

expressive works in the exhibit, next to the abstract paintings of the other 22 artists. *Silence* (1979), a carved portrait head with a plugged mouth, and *Chain* (1979), a portrait head with a hand gripped around its neck, both appeared to allude to the restrictive policies of the CCP, while *Idol* (1979) (Figure 3), a plump head of a man wearing a hat bearing a five-pointed star,



Figure 3. Wang Keping, *Idol*, 1979. © Wang Keping.

looked strikingly like an unflattering portrait of Mao (Wang Keping [1989] 2008:10). Such works, Wu Hung proposes, were seen at the time as “explicitly political, shocking the viewers with a fierce attack on Maoist ideology” (2010:6). As a result, the Stars’ transgressive exhibition was followed by an official reaction. After two days, the police shut down the exhibit. In response, on October 1, the group mounted a public demonstration in front of the Democracy Wall in Xidan, where the artists clearly aligned their artistic protests with demands for democratic freedom

within China. In a scene captured by Western media, the artists marched under banners that declared “March to Uphold the Constitution,” “Political Democracy,” and “Artistic Freedom!” (Wu 2010:9-10). Eventually, through the mediation of some senior members of the China Artists Association, the artists were permitted to remount their show in another location that same year. As I discuss below, the politically dissident statement of the Stars exhibition is an important precursor to *China/Avant-Garde*.

Compared to the Stars, the artistic activities of Huang Yong Ping and the Xiamen Dada group are less overtly political. As Fei Dawei explains, the group directed their projects at the artistic field rather than political policy. The group’s opposition was focused on the new avant-garde’s “emphasis on self-expression” (2005:7). Taking their cue from Duchamp’s rejection of “retinal” art, Huang Yong Ping and his colleagues pushed for a more conceptual approach to art making. They experimented with ideas of randomness, absurdity, and spontaneity, and questioned both the validity of art and the institutions that supported it. The group held only three exhibits, which they referred to as “events.” The first, on September 8, 1986, consisted of installations made from found objects, which Fei Dawei notes was “something rarely seen in Chinese avant-garde art at that time” (2005:9). They followed this show with an event on November 24 in front of the Cultural Palace in Xiamen, where they burned all of the works from the previous exhibit. They recorded the “events” with photographs and videos. Then, in December, they were permitted an exhibit at the Fujian Museum.

Instead of displaying artworks as expected, they moved objects such as boards and building materials from outside the museum and set them up around the interior exhibition space, on the floors and leaning against the walls (Hou 2005:12-13). Huang Yong Ping, who was the “group’s theoretician” and most prolific writer (Köppel-Yang 2003:61), declared in the exhibition statement that the artists had staged an “art event” since the event took place in a museum. The “assault,” he stated, was “not aimed at the visitors, but at their views of ‘art.’ Similarly, the target of the attack is the exhibition hall as a model of the art system, not the exhibition hall itself” (Huang [1986] 2010:96). The exhibition was “an art exhibit without works of art” (Huang [1986] 2010:96). Again, officials moved in and closed the show shortly after opening. In this instance, the group’s unorthodox challenge to the definition of art and the institution was enough to gain an official reaction.

According to Gao Minglu, Wang Du and the Southern Art Salon in Guangzhou were also motivated to challenge the artistic practices of the new avant-garde (2011:213). In 1986, the group staged an experimental art exhibit that included Wang Du’s performance piece noted above. In a statement about the exhibition, Wang claimed that the purpose of the exhibit was to present a new “cultural pluralism” that would challenge the “boundaries between the new and old, and the East and the West” (Gao

2011:213).¹⁴ Unlike the other two examples above, authorities did not close the exhibit. Rather, the most politically contentious activity of this group was their monthly discussion group, held at the Guangzhou public library, where Wang Du organized speakers on various subjects in philosophy, science, art, literature, and film. The lectures were followed by a discussion session where people became more and more comfortable with expressing their political views. The meetings were so popular that they sometimes attracted up to 300 people (Voltz 2004:155).¹⁵ Many of the lectures were then published in magazines, which only widened the audience (Voltz 2004:155). By 1987, the meetings had attracted the attention of the police, and Wang Du was warned to discontinue the salon. The meetings were stopped and never continued.

In each case, these group activities actively challenged the normative artistic and exhibitionary practices in China at the time. While largely artistic, they are inherently political for how they push the limits of free and open expression in China. The Stars' defiant exhibit demonstrated the limiting parameters for the public display of art while the Southern Art Group's discussion sessions demonstrated the limits of free intellectual exchange. Even Xiamen Dada's challenge to conventional artistic practice demonstrated the limits of China's artistic institutions to accept dissidence as an artistic value. In each case, artistic groups asserted the right of artists to

¹⁴ Gao cites a statement about the exhibit published in *Zhongguo meishubao*, no. 42 (Oct 20, 1986)(Gao 2011:386).

¹⁵ Voltz cites that up to 300 people attended some of these lectures, while in his interview for this study Wang Du claims a maximum of 100.

transgress boundaries and reinforced the artistic and political values of these activities. The formation of groups, then, gave the artists the power to be provocative and effective. Group activities, especially when closed down by officials, gained even greater public recognition and attention as radical and dissident expressions.

The contribution of artistic groups in the “making” of Chinese contemporary art is demonstrated in how these groups are now cited as important markers in the development of Chinese art. In one of the earliest historical summaries of Chinese contemporary art, Li Xianting (1993) writes that the Stars are recognized for “two important characteristics that uniquely define contemporary Chinese art”: one political and the other artistic. Li cites the group’s “use of a strong social, political and cultural criticism” and their introduction of “symbolism while at the same time relying on realist technique” (1993:XV). In Li’s history, Xiamen Dada is cited as an historical progression from the Stars in that they “attempt to achieve a conceptual transformation of art” (1993:XVI) through their Dadaist experiments. Li does not mention Wang Du and the Southern Art Group in this early history, perhaps because by 1993 Wang Du did not yet have a strong presence in the contemporary field. References to the Southern Art Salon and Wang Du appear in later histories. Gao Minglu’s 2011 publication, for example, cites the Southern Art Salon along with the Stars and Xiamen Dada groups as important contributors to Chinese contemporary art (213). The interrelationship between artists and groups and groups and artists is thus

reciprocal and cumulative. As one is recognized, so is the other. For example, the groups that are best remembered today are those whose members have also gained significant individual recognition in the international field of contemporary art.

Controversial group activities were also important for bringing Chinese contemporary art to the attention of Westerners. The Stars exhibit, for example, is notable as the first dissident exhibit to be recognized in the West. When the Stars remounted their show a few days after the closure, Western media were eager to see what the Chinese government had found so transgressive.¹⁶ The reports focused not on the art but on the politically transgressive nature of the show and the suggestion of official censorship. Feature headlines read: “Peking Permits Once-Banned Exhibit of New Art” (*New York Times*), “Artists Not Drawing Party Line” (*Asian Wall Street Journal*) (de Tilly 2008:58), and *Le Monde* declaring the Stars’ exhibit to be the “first exhibit of free art” (Jacob 1979).¹⁷ The attribution of dissidence was even more direct in a feature article on Wang Keping written by *New York Times* journalist Fox Butterfield, which later appeared as a chapter in his book *China – Alive in the Bitter Sea* ([1982] 1983:435-445). Calling Wang “China’s best-known dissident artist,” (435) Butterfield describes a

¹⁶ The show was also popular with Chinese citizens, even if they had to pay an admission price. On the first day the artists sold over 500 admission tickets, and the momentum built so that by the end of the show over 33,000 people had seen the exhibit (Lebold Cohen 1987:59).

¹⁷ Chinese media did not write about the exhibit publicly, but journalists from Xinhua News Agency attended the exhibit and related forum. The first domestic publication on the exhibit appeared in the March 1980 issue of *Meishu* art magazine (Wang Keping [1989] 2008:44).

clandestine visit to Wang's apartment, where he claims Wang must hide his sculptures because "he lives with uncertainty about how the police and the Party authorities who govern China's art world intend to deal with him" (436). Ultimately, the Western recognition of the Stars exhibit, even if it was primarily from the popular media, had a positive and important effect in that such reports provided the first indication of a politically dissident contemporary art movement in China.

Western recognition of Chinese contemporary art was also important *inside* China. Westerners played a significant role in affirming the value of the young artists' experimental and transgressive efforts. The affirmations came not only from journalists who reported on controversial events but also from the growing number of foreign students, teachers, and diplomats living in China during the reform years, beginning in the late 1970s. In addition to providing reading material on the art world outside of China, foreigners often assumed the "role of instant connoisseur and cultural expert" (Barmé 1999:192). They encouraged the artists in their experimental and avant-garde endeavors by buying their artworks and attending their peripheral exhibitions. Some foreigners even provided exhibition venues in their homes and on diplomatic compounds (Barmé 1999:193; dal Lago [1992] 1993). Writing about China in the late 1970s, Geremie Barmé notes how "foreigners, in particular diplomats, students and reporters, became a central feature of the young people's cultural scene" (1999:192). The foreigners gave the artists a window into an art world they did not know and inspired confidence

through their encouragement. In our interview, Yang Jiechang relates how such encouragement came from both his German girlfriend (who is now his wife), Martina Köppel-Yang, and from a visiting German artist. As Yang relates, the German artist

told me, 'You really are a great artist.' I didn't believe him. Now I believe him. At that time, I didn't like to admit that I was good enough. I just continued to work. But he was right and so was Martina. At that time there were very few artists like me that he was interested in studying.

Even more influential for Yang, and many other artists, were the studio visits made by Jean-Hubert Martin, the only important Western professional curator to visit China before 1989. With the aid of Fei Dawei and Hou Hanru, Martin came to China in 1987 to look for artists for the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition. Martin visited avant-garde artists in five cities across China. He insisted on seeing the artists and their work in their home studios. When he heard that Martin wanted to come to Guangzhou to visit him, Yang related to me that he was worried that he would never compare to the other artists. Yang explained, "I didn't know what the Pompidou was or who this guy was" but Köppel-Yang, who was aware of Martin's importance, urged him to agree to the visit. In the end, Martin selected Yang Jiechang along with Huang Yong Ping and Gu Dexin to participate in *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris in 1989 (see Chapter Three).

With little or no recognition coming from the most powerful artistic factions in their own country, and no Chinese "masters" of the new Western art, foreigners provided the young artists with much-needed affirmation that

their artistic endeavors were valued and appreciated. In this study, all but two of the nine artists had met and had influential relationships with foreigners before leaving China. Notably, four of the artists met their Western spouses in China. For each of these subjects, the relationships with foreigners, whether as friends or spouses, also played a role in the artist's decision to emigrate.¹⁸ Such advantageous social relationships, inside and outside of China, have been important forms of social capital that have facilitated the recognition of the individual artists, their work, and Chinese contemporary art as a larger group endeavour.

The special combination of a large group activity, artists expressing their dissident difference through Western art practices, and foreign recognition have all contributed to making the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit an especially powerful artistic event. The idea for a group exhibition featuring China's avant-garde artists was first initiated in August 1986 at a national

¹⁸ Wang Keping was the first Chinese national to marry a foreigner after the Cultural Revolution and gained some celebrity in both China and the West. He had to apply to the highest level of government to obtain permission to marry. His French wife was teaching at Peking University and he followed her to France. Wang Du met and married a French journalist, Agnès Gaudu, in Guangzhou and after his release from prison in 1990, he immigrated to France. Huang Yong Ping and Yang Jiechang met Jean-Hubert Martin and went to France for *Magiciens de la Terre*. Yang Jiechang married Martina Köppel, who aided in his immigration to Germany. Shen Yuan, Huang Yong Ping's wife, likely met Jean-Hubert Martin and followed her husband to France in 1990. Du Zhenjun met a French national at the university where he was teaching. His friend helped him enroll in language classes in Bordeaux, France. Ru Xiaofan met a Canadian woman studying in China. They moved together to France when Ru Xiaofan, aided by a French friend, gained acceptance to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Curator Hou Hanru met Jean-Hubert Martin during his visit to China and was invited by Fei Dawei to come to France to help with an exhibit of Chinese art. Chen Zhen and Yan Pei-Ming both emigrated before 1989 and were aided by family members.

artists' conference in Zhuhai, Guangdong, and planned for 1987 (Gao 2011:144-45). Gao Minglu and Li Xianting were the key organizers of the exhibition. Obtaining an exhibition site, permission to exhibit, and sponsors to fund the project in the unsettled political climate proved daunting, as Gao Minglu's account relates.¹⁹ Officials and potential sponsors were wary of promoting an event that might turn out to be politically contentious. According to Gao, the exhibit was approved but then cancelled at the last minute by the "Propaganda Department and the China Art Association" (1999:88; 2011:145). It was the height of the Anti-Bourgeois Liberal campaign and as Gao points out it "was a show of Western modern and postmodern styles" which the government "considered heretical" (1999:89). By 1988 the political situation had improved, so the organizers initiated another application, this time requesting space in the China Art Gallery. After petitioning support from the China Artists Association, the exhibit was finally approved with three conditions: that there would be no performance art, no nude or pornographic images, and no works critical of the CCP (Gao 1999:92-3). The challenge for the organizers was twofold: how to distinguish their show from official exhibits that would typically be featured in the Gallery and, at the same time, retain the freedom and unexpectedness of an avant-

¹⁹ Gao Minglu's firsthand account of the organization of the exhibit (both the earlier plans and the final version) formed a major part of his Harvard PhD dissertation (Gao Minglu 1999), which is an important primary document for understanding the development of *China/Avant-Garde*. He has elaborated on the subject in later publications (2005:69-70; 2011:138-166). See also Li Xianting's documentation of the exhibit in Wu Hung 2010:116-120.

garde event within the clear but limited parameters set by government officials.

The organizing committee employed two key strategies for defining their exhibit as different and dissident: naming the exhibit and carefully selecting artists whose work met the criteria for what was understood to be “avant-garde” art. With the restrictive parameters in mind and wary of another cancellation, the organizers were careful in choosing a name for the exhibit. The 1987 exhibit was given the rather innocuous title *Gedi qingnian meishujia xueshu jiaoliuzhan* or *Academic Exchange Exhibition for Nationwide Young Artists* (Gao 2011:145). Nothing in this name indicated the avant-garde nature of the artwork, and the show could have easily been mistaken for an official exhibition of art. As Gao Minglu suggests, this title was deliberately selected to temper the level of provocation. The name carefully “avoided radical terms like ‘avant-garde,’ ‘modern,’ and so on, which would have been insulting and a red flag to political officials” (Gao 2011:145). By the late 1980s, no consistent name had yet been assigned to the new art. The new art was variously referred to as modern art (*xiandai yishu*), contemporary art (*dangdai yishu*), avant-garde art (*qianwei* or *qianfeng yishu*), and new wave art (*xin chao yishu*). In Chinese, the terms “modern art” and “contemporary art” were the most common words to be applied to any new experimental art, even new approaches in socialist realism and *guohua*, or Chinese ink painting. New wave art (*xin chao yishu*) was a difficult word choice since it was often associated with the May Fourth Movement, a pre-

Communist-era avant-garde movement that was tied to Republican political reform (Gao 2011:166). The word *xiandai*, on the other hand, was less contentious as it had already been incorporated into official discourse. *Xiandaihua* (modern culture), for example, was used to signal China's bold and distinctly Chinese form of modernization. With these factors in mind, the committee changed the exhibit name to *Zhongguo xiandai yishu zhan*, literally meaning *China Modern Art Exhibit*, when they resurrected their plans in 1988.

Still, the organizers deliberately translated the English title differently, calling the show *China/Avant-Garde*. In explaining the choice of Chinese and English words, Gao Minglu relates,

We chose different titles in Chinese and English because during the '80s, 'xiandai' (modern) was more frequently used than 'qianwe' [sic] (avant-garde) in the Chinese art world. We chose 'xiandai' as the Chinese title which means new and radical art and is more suitable for its own cultural context. On the other hand, in a Western context 'modern' might indicate modernism, an old style. Although 'avant-garde' is also out of fashion in the West, we thought it closer to the idea behind the Chinese avant-garde and proper for foreigners' understanding the new art movement (1999:89).

In a later account (2011), Gao added that he discussed the English title with the editor of the catalogue, Zhao Yan, and the English translator, Hou Hanru, and that they "all agreed that 'avant-garde' made more sense than 'modern' as a translation of the original Chinese title" (2011:166). He qualified this choice by noting that "avant-garde" could be perceived as "more contemporary, ongoing, and not confined to a style" (2011:166). The English name then allowed the organizers to hint at the dissident nature of the

exhibit to their foreign audience. As Fei Dawei, who was also involved in organizing the exhibit, proposed in an interview conducted in France in 1989, just before the Tiananmen Square incident, the word “avant-garde” was meant to appeal to foreigners and imply the dissident character of the show. Asked why there were two titles for the show, Fei responded that the Chinese title was chosen because it was “relatively discreet” while the English title “expressed openly a militant spirit which shows our resolution to break with the old, conservative culture and launch us into the world contemporary art movement” (Fei 1989: 30).²⁰

The English words of the exhibit title were then equally significant to the organizers’ strategy. They served several purposes. First, they informed Beijing’s foreign population, including Western media, of the avant-garde nature of the upcoming exhibit. English translations were included not only in the title but also on the exhibition banner and in the exhibition catalogue, indicating that the organizers clearly wanted to solicit a foreign audience. Interestingly, the original budget for the exhibition was also translated into English. An original copy of this document was reproduced in Gao Minglu’s 2011 book (153), though it is not clear where it originally appeared or how it

²⁰ From the French. My translation. “Son titre chinois : ‘Exposition d’art contemporain en Chine’ est une formule relativement discrète, alors que ‘Chine/avant-garde’ exprime ouvertement un esprit militant qui montre notre résolution de rompre avec la culture ancienne, conservatrice, et de nous lancer dans le mouvement de l’art mondial” (30). Interestingly, Fei uses the word *contemporain* in French, which does not have the same connotations as *moderne*, which would have been a more appropriate translation for the Chinese title. Perhaps this indicates his eagerness for Chinese art to be considered internationally within the context of contemporary rather than modern art.

was used. Its translation, however, suggests that the organizers may have petitioned foreigners for financial support to cover the exhibition expenses.²¹ Second, the English title also subtly indicated the show's radical difference for Chinese audiences through the use of English words, even if the words were not understood. And finally, the English title and word "avant-garde" signaled an interesting and contradictory overall objective for the show – that the exhibit was not only about changing artistic practices and regulations in China but also about Chinese art joining the larger international field of contemporary art. The “militant spirit” (Fei 1989:30) of Chinese contemporary art was not only a dissident gesture directed towards the strong and immovable consensus in China, it was also an effort to challenge the consensus of a Western field that did not yet see or understand the contemporaneity of Chinese art.

A second way that the organizers distinguished the show was through their selection of artists and artworks. The call for submission (a document that was not translated into English) indicates how the organizers were looking for work that transgressed the boundaries of China's official art. Using the word *xiandai* rather than *qianwei*, the call strongly emphasized the “modern” and “experimental” character of the work to be considered for the exhibit:

The ‘China/Avant-Garde’ exhibition will exhibit for the first time featured artworks made with modern concepts and in the modern

²¹ The budget total was 219,050 RMB and included costs for rent (45,000 RMB), transportation, promotion, and so on. It was extraordinary sum for any Chinese citizen to raise at that time (2011:153).

spirit to the art world in both China and internationally, as well as to the general public. The show will also reflect the art movement and avant-garde [Chinese text uses *xiandai*] explorations in the past few years that are being debated and evaluated in art circles, and the value and significance of modern art in the development of Chinese culture. As a high-powered exchange and research event in the field of modern art, the show will boost the development of art pluralism in the Chinese art world (Gao 2011:150).

This passage emphasizes three closely linked objectives: once again, the aim to have the show appeal to a wider international audience; second, a more parochial aim to change and pluralize the artistic field in China through “modern” art; and, third, to find artists who could successfully aid in achieving these first two objectives by producing singularly original art. This latter objective thus emphasizes a desire for artists who are capable of working outside of the official practices and who demonstrate “originality” rather than “normality.” This “imperative of singularity” was clarified further in a list of criteria for entry where the second point added that “all entries *must* demonstrate the established artistic concept of the artist bearing his/her *individual character, modernity and novel visual form* [my italics]” (Gao 1999:95; Gao 2011:150). Even if at times the writers stated their point obliquely by using the word *xiandai* (modern) rather than *qianwei* (avant-garde), it is clear that they were seeking very distinct artworks, ones that would stand out for their “novelty” rather than their conventionality, their “individuality” rather than conformity, and their “modernity” or “avant-garde nature” rather than their use of mandated artistic practices.

With two titles, one in Chinese and the other in English, and with its emphasis on an avant-garde aesthetic that employed Western artistic

practices, *China/Avant-Garde* successfully distinguished China's new art as singular and dissident. It would be the exhibition as an event, however, rather than the individual artworks that would make the strongest statement in China and abroad. On February 5, the plaza outside of the museum was draped with an enormous black, red, and white banner featuring a large no-U-turn symbol and the name of the exhibit in English and Chinese.²²

Describing the effect of the banner and this bold display, Li Xianting recalls that "the atmosphere in the plaza was intense, and my mind was full of thoughts about the impact that this exhibition would have on society" ([1989] 2010:119). Inside, however, the show was not especially remarkable, as Li and others admit (Li 2010; Wu 1999:20; Hang and Cao [1989] 2010). The exhibition included a large survey of work dating back to 1979; primarily realistic and abstract ink painting and realist oil painting (Li [1989] 2010:118). Much of this work was meant to give an overview of art following the Reform period. These works and, indeed, many of the newer paintings were not much more than derivatives of Western surrealism, expressionism, and abstraction. Since the works had been selected by slide submission and the curators never saw the originals until only days before

²² The banner was originally meant to float above the entrance to the museum with balloons (Li 2010:119). See the Asia Art Archive for an online collection of images from *China/Avant-Garde*: <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/Search?csao%5b0%5d.sword=China%2F%20Avant-Garde&csao%5b0%5d.sopt=0&csao%5b0%5d.stype=1&csao%5b1%5d.sopt=0&csao%5b1%5d.stype=0&csao%5b2%5d.sopt=0&csao%5b2%5d.stype=0&phydig=All&facce=Online&sorting=ta>

the opening, Li Xianting claims that “a considerable portion of the original works that were sent to the exhibition turned out to be unsatisfactory” ([1989] 2010:119). Perhaps it is for this reason that local critics complained that the overall quality of the work was “too crudely made” and based more on “imitation” than originality (Hang and Cao [1989] 2010:124-125). The boldest and most “contemporary” works in the show were found-object sculptures, installations, and performances. The artists interviewed for this study contributed some of these more innovative pieces. For example, Shen Yuan exhibited a bed with a rubber mattress filled with water and goldfish, and Huang Yong Ping washed two art history books, one Western and one Chinese, in a washing machine and displayed the mixed pulp (Andrews and Gao 1995:256).

Foreseeing a lack of “avant-garde spirit” even before the opening, Li Xianting took steps to make the show more effectively “confront society” (Li [1989] 2010:116). He wanted to “build a certain atmosphere with a sense of freshness and provocation unlike that of any exhibition the general public had ever seen” (Li [1989] 2010:116). He decided to do this by secretly approving several performance pieces despite the ban on performance art. On opening day, to everyone’s surprise, Wu Shanzhuan created a “black market for art” (Li [1989] 2010:116) by selling shrimp to visitors as they entered the museum and Wang Duren “scattered condoms and coins around one of the galleries” (Hang and Cao [1989] 2010:123). These two performances, which Li had hoped would cause an appropriate avant-garde

“provocation” ([1989] 2010:116), were suddenly overshadowed by the sound of gunshots reverberating through the museum. Xiao Lu, a young artist from Beijing, entered the museum and fired a gun at her installation work, *Dialogue*. Authorities immediately shut down the exhibition. Xiao Lu and her boyfriend, Tang Song, who documented the performance in photos, were arrested but released a few days later. Meanwhile, Chinese and Western journalists converged on the museum. As Hang and Cao describe in their narrative of the event, “the ‘gunshot incident’ led to sensational reactions and caused the exhibition’s second opening [a few days later] to draw even greater crowds” ([1989] 2010:122). Chinese journalists, many of whom had rarely taken an interest in the peripheral activities of the avant-garde artists, now wanted to report on this new contemporary art (Hang and Cao [1989] 2010:120). The interest of Western journalists was also piqued. Rather than report on the artworks, the Western media focused on the closure of the exhibition and reported it as an act of censorship. *The New York Times* featured a photograph with a headline reading, “Police in China Close Art Show After Artist Shoots Her Work.” The caption below the image described the show as “an exhibition of avant-garde art” but provided no further details on the art. Instead, the writer described how visitors were “confronted by a locked gate” after police closed the show because of the gunshot (*New York Times* 1989). Jasper Becker, writing for *The Guardian* under the headline “Art shock tactic lost on Beijing,” did mention the “bohemian” and counter-culture atmosphere of the show and described the

“surreal” nature of the work: “including a giant vagina with a zip, a large plastic breast suspended from the ceiling above a matching phallus, a dead winter cabbage, plastic gloves, obscure mechanical contraptions, images of drooping clocks, and sheets of paper hung along the ceiling.” Still, Becker twice asserts that the gunshot incident was the “excuse” the police used to shut down the show (Becker 1989).²³

As Xiao Lu and Tang Song declared in 1989, the gunshot incident was “a pure artistic event,” especially in regard to their own work, which is now recalled in every history of Chinese contemporary art. The exhibit *China/Avant-Garde*, however, was much more than the “gunshot incident” – it was the conglomeration of many different social factors and actions that now, in retrospect, gain some clarity. As Heinich proposes, an artistic event “affects people in a certain way, produces certain effects and generates certain discourses” (2000:166). Such effects can never be anticipated, only retrospectively considered in the context of later outcomes.

The artists in this study, along with their artistic colleagues in the ‘85 Movement, took up Western artistic practices as a way to distinguish themselves in a highly regulated artistic field. Through their transgressive and dissident production they asserted a desire to shift the limits of artistic expression in China and join a more global artistic movement. Taking up this desire as a group endeavour, the organizers of *China/Avant-Garde* orchestrated a provocative exhibit that successfully challenged the artistic

²³ *Le Monde* did not report on the incident even though, according to the *Guardian*, the French Ambassador had attended the opening (Becker 1989).

consensus of what is and is not art in China. At the same time, the exhibit elicited a different reaction from the West; *China/Avant-Garde* demonstrated the political dissidence of Chinese art. It was this political dissidence, more than artistic difference, which intrigued Western observers and thus became the basis for assigning a dissident value to Chinese contemporary art. Still, the provocative ripples of the individual and group actions may well have settled down shortly after the closing of *China/Avant-Garde* if not for the Tiananmen Square incident a few months later, and the introduction of Chinese contemporary artists at the *Les Magiciens de la Terre* exhibit in Paris that same summer. The combined artistic and political impact of these two later events would eventually highlight the subversive dimension of *China/Avant-Garde* and give it a truly singular place in the development of Chinese contemporary art.

Chapter Three

Identity and Difference: 1989 and Chinese Artists in France

The year 1989 was significant for France. The French celebrated the bicentennial of the French Revolution and President François Mitterrand hosted the G7 Summit in the summer of that year. The overlapping time of these events meant that France had the unprecedented “opportunity,” as Michael F. Leruth put it, “to show itself off to the world” (1998:54). Sparring no expense, Mitterrand’s government wanted to make the bicentennial a memorable national and international event (Leruth 1998:54). Two of the most significant and costly events of this celebration were the international contemporary art exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* and the spectacular Bastille Day parade that was presented to a worldwide television audience and a crowd of foreign dignitaries on the Champs-Élysées on July 14, 1989.¹ Both events were designed to evoke the liberal-democratic values – liberty, fraternity, and equality – founded by the revolution two hundred years before. *Les Magiciens de la Terre* emphasized these values by inviting artists from outside Euro-America to exhibit in what was billed as the first truly

¹ In 1987, the bicentennial commission was given a budget of 45 million francs, which was increased steadily so that by the end of 1988 the budget was valued at over 300 million francs. In June 1988, the commission received another 50 million francs, and three weeks later this was increased to 125 million. By October 1988, the government added another 200 million. Corporate sponsors were also sought and another 31 million francs was raised. Of this amount, 25 million was assigned to the parade (Kaplan 1995:233-234), while the budget for *Magiciens* was 30 million francs. See note 2 below.

international contemporary art exhibit in a major Western museum (Martin and Francblin 1989:34; Heartney 1989:91). The bicentennial parade, or *La Marseillaise* as it was formally called, with its predominance of African and Middle Eastern participants, celebrated the new diversity of France and a world that was increasingly culturally integrated. The symbolic significance of these two events was serendipitously enhanced by the media coverage of protests in Beijing in May and June that same summer. As if on cue, and in recognition of the French bicentennial, the protesting students in Beijing hoisted signs with the date 1789 and sang *La Marseillaise*. For France and the Western world, as Steven Kaplan notes, the “Chinese student uprising restituted a vivid sense of the enormity of the stakes involved in the struggle for human rights” and “elicited the pride as well as the sympathy of the French” (1995:39). Recognizing the affinity of these events, the journal *Sud Ouest* declared, “what a model our country represents for those aspiring to democracy” (Kaplan 1995:39).

For Chinese contemporary art, the two events in France, while seemingly peripheral in their location and theme, are significant. Two artists who took part in this study, Huang Yong Ping and Yang Jiechang, as well as artist Gu Dexin and art historian Fei Dawei, were invited to France to take part in *Magiciens de la Terre*. It was the first time that Chinese contemporary artists had been included in a major, contemporary art exhibit. Sponsored by the exhibition, the three artists made their first-ever journey outside of China and arrived in France several months before the May 18 exhibit opening. As

a consultant for the exhibit, Fei was making his second visit to France. After the Tiananmen Square incident, all four Chinese nationals were offered asylum in France; Huang, Yang, and Fei all accepted and began their new lives as immigrants.

In this chapter, I consider the intersection of these three events – the *Les Magiciens de la Terre* exhibit, the bicentennial parade, and the Tiananmen Square incident – as a way of understanding the artistic and political context that has played an important hand in shaping the Western valorization of the Chinese artist as dissident. In 1989, *Magiciens de la Terre* provided the necessary bridge to a very powerful cultural centre in the West where Chinese artists were introduced and contrasted to established Western contemporary artists. The location in Paris, especially during the bicentennial celebration, also set these artists in a geo-political territory where their national identity contrasted sharply with the liberal-democratic values of the West. Drawing on a personal interview conducted in 2010 with the curator of *Magiciens de la Terre*, Jean-Hubert Martin, I consider how the difference of Chinese art and artists was mediated in relationship to Western contemporary art and artists. At the same time, I consider the political contrast of these differences in relation to the ideological program of the bicentennial celebration, here illustrated by the parade. The bicentennial parade was the most climactic event of the year-long celebration. Unlike *Magiciens de la Terre*, which was initially conceived as an independent

event,² the parade was initiated by the bicentennial committee and designed to meet the thematic objectives set out by the Cultural Ministry. Steven Kaplan and Michael LeRuth have provided excellent analyses of the bicentenary and the parade, which I have drawn on extensively for understanding the discourse of this presentation (Kaplan 1995; LeRuth 1995; 1998). As they have both indicated, the parade was designed to represent the most significant outcome of the revolution, the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, a document that has played a founding role in French political philosophy and in the establishment of liberal-democratic values in most Western nations. It was this document that gave the French their motto, “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” and shaped the ideals that informed the Western belief in free expression and universal human rights. The bicentennial theme was also meant to stress that the revolutionary work begun in 1789 was not yet over. As the parade commission acknowledged, “multitudes of ‘Berlin Walls’” in the “Third

² Under the direction of Jean-Hubert Martin, *Magiciens* was originally conceived for the Paris Biennale scheduled for 1989 (Buchloh 1989:150; Martin and Bartil 1989: 140). The Biennale was typically held in La Grande Halle at La Villette, a park and cultural complex in Paris. In 1987, Martin was named Director of the Musée Nationale d’Art Moderne (MNAM) at the Centre Georges Pompidou. The directorship allowed Martin to add more exhibition space, greater financial resources, and the prestige of the Pompidou to the project. Then, in 1988, *Magiciens* was designated the contemporary art event for the bicentennial, gaining it even more significance and an even larger budget. In the end, the combined budgets from the bicentennial, the Biennale, and MNAM, along with sponsorships from two major corporations, Canal + and the Scaler Foundation, totaled 30 million francs, the largest budget ever assigned to a contemporary art event in France (Martin and Bartil 1989:140; Martin and Francblin 1989:38). Canal+ contributed 6 million francs, half of which was designated for purchases of work from the show (*artpress-Dossier* 1989:33; Picard 1989:59).

World” and in “Eastern Europe” (Kaplan 1995:144-145) continued to trouble the world and “new Bastilles,” such as disease, unemployment, and the plight of immigrants, continued to exclude many French citizens “from the practice, pleasure, and profit of liberty” (Kaplan 1995:145). The bicentenary was, then, a celebration of the achievements of the revolution as much as an extension of “fraternity” to all the peoples of the world, emphasizing that all nations deserved to share in the liberal-democratic ideal. The Tiananmen Square incident, occurring just a month before the parade, illustrated the limits of this universalizing ideal. All three events, then, while not all directly related to the production of Chinese contemporary art, demonstrate how different converging fields – artistic, social, and political – have contributed to interpellating the identity of Chinese artists as different and dissident.

As some writers noted, *Magiciens de la Terre* very neatly addressed the ideological ideals of the French bicentennial (Bouisset and Thomas 1989:44). Controversial and contentious at the time, *Les Magiciens de la Terre* is now regarded as a seminal event in the world of contemporary art (Heartney 2000; Steeds et al 2013). As art historian and critic Benjamin Buchloh proposed at the time, *Magiciens de la Terre* was “a long overdue and courageous attempt to depart from the hegemonic and monocentric cultural perspectives of Western European and American institutions” (Martin and Buchloh 1989:151). Presented in Paris in two major exhibition sites, Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle in the Parc de la Villette, from May 18 to August 14, 1989, *Magiciens de la Terre* featured the work of 100 artists

from five continents. Fifty of the artists, including Hans Haacke (USA), On Kawara (Japan), Daniel Buren (France), Anselm Kiefer (Germany), Jeff Wall (Canada), Richard Long (England) and Marina Abramovic (Yugoslavia & Netherlands), were already recognized figures in the field, with established and respected artistic careers. The other 50 artists, including Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, and Gu Dexin, were artists from places peripheral to the Western artistic field – such as China, Zaire, India, and Papua New Guinea – most of whom had never before exhibited outside of their own countries (Martin 1989). With its inclusion of artists from outside the West, it was designed to break down the “Bastille” of the art world and open the door to the many disregarded artists of the *tiers-monde*, or Third World.

From its inception, principal curator Jean-Hubert Martin, who was also the director of the Musée nationale de l’art moderne (MNAM), France’s most important national modern art museum at the time, envisioned *Magiciens* as a provocative and controversial exhibition. Like a transgressive artwork, he designed the exhibit to be singularly different and provocative. Martin distinguished *Magiciens* by using it as a platform to introduce a new inclusiveness into the artistic field and to challenge the paradigms of what is and is not art, and who is and is not an artist. In an interview in *Art in America* in 1989, just before the opening, Martin explained,

I want to exhibit artists from all over the world, and I want to leave the ghetto of contemporary Western art within which we have found ourselves during the last few decades (Martin and Buchloh 1989:213).

The “ghetto of contemporary Western art,” that Martin describes had, up until the late 1980s, resisted the inclusion of artists from outside Euro-America. In an interview in *artpress*, Martin pointed out that “international art” typically included only Europe, North America, Japan, and a little bit of South America (Martin and Franchblin 1989:34). Cultural chauvinism, geography, and broadly different aesthetic and institutional practices had contributed to this exclusion. When contemporary art from outside the West was exhibited at all, it was presented in specialty museums where the emphasis was usually on the ethnological, social, or craft aspects of the work. Chinese avant-garde art is a case in point. Prior to *Magiciens* and 1989, Chinese avant-garde art was featured in several exhibits in the United States. These exhibits were all held in small private galleries, Asian specialty museums, or on university campuses, all of which lacked the prestige of the top museums and attracted little attention in the contemporary art field.³ International contemporary exhibits, such as the Venice Biennale, were also exclusive and dominated by the Western nations despite their global pretensions. Such exhibits are typically structured to showcase individual nations, with each nation funding their own participation. Many nations outside the industrialized West did not have the economic resources or arts

³ For example, *Chinese Art After the Revolution* (1983) at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, *Painting the Chinese Dream-Chinese Art 30 Years After the Revolution* (1986) at Smith College Museum in Northampton, Massachusetts, *Avant-Garde Chinese Art* (1986) at Vassar College, New York, and *Beyond the Open Door: Contemporary Painting from the People’s Republic of China* (39 artists) in 1987 at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California.

infrastructure to participate in such events (Kuroda 1994; Elkins 2007).

With no local support and little understanding of the aesthetic parameters and institutional requirements in the West, it is not surprising that only a few non-Western artists had, prior to 1989, gained entry into the field.⁴

Magiciens de la Terre was a very different model for presenting and recognizing artists from outside the West. All of the artists were given equal representation in that each artist exhibited one work and the works were spread out across the two venues with no discernable divisions (such as national or regional boundaries). Unlike the controversial 1984 exhibit *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Rubin 1984), where authorless “primitive” works were juxtaposed to the work of recognized Western modern artists, Martin ensured that all artists in *Magiciens* were named. In the large catalogue produced for the show, each artist is featured on two pages and arranged alphabetically according to the artist’s name. Countries of origin and residence are noted for all artists along with the artist’s date of birth and exhibition record (Martin 1989).⁵ In our interview in 2010, Yang Jiechang expressed what an exceptional experience

⁴ As Wuggenig and Buchholz’s research indicates, artists who relocate to Western centres such as Paris and New York have a better chance of success in the field. Success, however, has still historically eluded most women, African-Americans, and artists from outside the dominant West (Wuggenig 2002; Wuggenig and Buchholz 2005). Even with its program of equality, *Magiciens de la Terre* still favoured male artists. Only nine female artists participated in the exhibition: five from Euro-American countries and four from other regions.

⁵ See the official website for *Magiciens de la Terre*, which provides floor plans of the exhibition, images of the exhibition, images and information on each of the artists, and documents pertaining to the exhibit: <http://magiciensdelaterre.fr>.

this arrangement afforded an unknown artist. Yang noted how his large ink paintings were hung on a wall in the Grande Halle in the Parc de la Villette in close proximity to work by Nam June Paik, Anselm Kiefer, Jeff Wall, Alighiero Boetti, and others. At the time, Yang did not recognize any of these artists. As he proudly noted to me: “I did not know them, I did not know who they were, but I was there in the centre with all the other important artists.”

In interviews conducted with the art press and the media before the opening, Martin outlined the objectives of the exhibit and emphasized how he aimed to challenge prevalent perceptions of contemporary art. He planned to do this by juxtaposing the artistic differences between the work of the known and unknown artists. Martin knew this proposal would be controversial. Martin warned, “there will be many surprises, and the art world will not always like it. But they will certainly see things they have never seen before” (Martin and Buchloh 1989:213). Martin explained the “surprises” as visual shocks: “what interests me are the visual shocks that such an exhibition can possibly produce and the thinking that it might provoke” (Martin and Buchloh 1989:213). This idea of “visual shock,” Martin explained in an interview with *Libération*, came from his experience viewing the juxtaposition of “primitive” and Western art, first in André Breton’s studio when he was a student and then in an Australian museum where he saw Aboriginal sand paintings alongside the work of Western artists (Martin and Bartil 1989:140). The question that arose for Martin was why one type of visual production was recognized as art and another was not. Martin

noted how the disciplines of music, performance, and theatre had already accepted different cultural modes of expression and wondered why, in the visual arts field, it was “still taboo to show artists who come from completely different cultural contexts than our own” (Martin and Bartil 1989:140).⁶ Furthermore, Martin wanted to emphasize the conceptual contrasts between the art of the West and art of the Other. As he pointed out in an interview with *artpress*, Western art “has left little place for the phenomenon of irrational and transcendental thought” and yet “there are many more magic and irrational practices in artistic activity than we care to admit” (Martin and Francblin 1989:38).

With these objectives, Martin and his curatorial team chose to call the exhibit *Magicians of the Earth*, leaving out the critical words, “contemporary” and “art.” As he explained:

At first, I thought that one could not put the label “art” on objects that have come from communities that do not know such a concept. In fact, I then noticed, in the course of developing the project, that many non-Western artists are closer to our concept than one might have thought. Therefore, the term “magicians” allowed us, first of all, to avoid the word “art” (Martin and Francblin 1989:38).⁷

⁶ From the French. My translation. “Pourquoi, dans notre réseau des arts plastiques, subsistait cette espèce de tabou interdisant de montrer des artistes venant de contextes culturels complètement différent du nôtre” (Martin and Bartil 1989:140).

⁷ From the French. My translation. “Au début, je pensais qu’on ne pouvait pas mettre l’étiquette ‘art’ sur des oeuvres en provenance de communautés qui ne connaissaient pas ce concept. En fait, je me suis aperçu, au cours de l’élaboration du projet, que beaucoup d’artistes non-occidentaux sont plus proches de notre concept qu’on ne le croit. Donc, le terme de ‘magiciens’ permet, tout d’abord, d’éviter le mot ‘art.’ Ensuite, il est pris dans son acception la plus large, pas du tout au sens littéral. Pour les artistes occidentaux, il s’agit d’une génération qui a commencé à travailler sous l’emprise de l’idéologie marxiste et dans un espace de recherche de la rigueur

By unifying Western artists with their Others under the banner of “magic” rather than art, Martin aimed to provoke not only a visual shock but also a conceptual shock. As he explained in our interview, “the point of the show was to question these categories [of art] and this is what, to my disappointment, many people didn’t get. They cannot put question marks on their own categories.” Still, despite its egalitarian presentation, Martin’s deliberate contrast was designed to initiate a “disagreement” about both artistic and cultural categories. As Martin told Buchloh, “a basic idea of our exhibition is to question the relationship of our culture to other cultures of the world [...] I wondered whether it would be possible to accelerate these relationships and the dialogue ensuing from them” (Martin and Buchloh 1989:155). Martin’s curatorial objective then was twofold: to make the critics and other agents in the art world rethink their evaluative categories for contemporary art and, in keeping with the bicentennial’s political objectives, to open up a more inclusive space in the artistic field in France if not internationally. Designed to work together, the two objectives marry the political aim of challenging the exclusivity of Euro-American cultural identity with the artistic aim of re-imagining what can and cannot be art.

– celui de l’art conceptuel et minimal – qui laissait peu de place à des phénomènes de pensées irrationnelle ou transcendantale. Or, je me suis aperçu qu’il y a beaucoup plus de magie, de pratiques irrationnelles dans l’activité artistique, qu’on ne veut bien le dire” (Martin and Francblin 1989:38).

With this objective, Martin and his curatorial team set out to choose artists that would successfully highlight the controversial artistic contrast.⁸ The approach for selecting Western artists and non-Western artists differed. The selection of Western artists was relatively simple, since the artists were already well-recognized in the West and familiar to Martin and his team. While several artists were new to large international exhibitions, they had all been previously vetted through contemporary exhibits in Europe or the United States. In other words, in keeping with Heinrich's proposal that contemporary artists are recognized for challenging some artistic, social, or political boundary with their art, this suggests that all of the Western artists had already established their singular originality within the field. As such, the Western artists provided the norm against which the Other artists would be contrasted.

Still, Martin did apply one criterion that provided a mediating theme for his selection of Western artists. Martin also looked for artists who could "show, in their work, an interest in other civilizations" (Martin and Francblin 1989:36). For example, he selected Marina Abramovic, who produced a work influenced by her travels in China. At the same time, he chose Nam June Paik (Korean-American) and Shirazeh Houshiary (Pakistani-British), two artists born outside of the West but practicing in the West, "simply" on

⁸ Martin's all-male curatorial team included Jan Debbaut, the director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands; Mark Francis, the former director of the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, Scotland; and Jean-Louis Maubant, the director of the New Museum of Lyon-Villeurbanne in France (Martin 1989; Picard 1989:59).

“the fact of their birth” (Martin and Francblin 1989:36).⁹ In the context of the contrast that Martin was aiming to present, this criterion suggests that Martin was also trying to indicate that the normalcy of Western contemporary art had already been affected by the alterity of the Other.

The selection of the unknown artists was a much more difficult and complicated task. The unknown artists had not been previously identified in the West. Moreover, they were located in far-off countries, where different languages were spoken, and from regions where art institutions may have been non-existent or less established than in the West. Even if there were institutions in place, as there was in China with the China Artists Association, Martin was adamant that he did not want to rely on official channels for finding artists.¹⁰ Rather, Martin or a member of his team visited every artist in his or her own country. As Martin emphasized in his interview with me,

⁹ From the French. My translation. “Un des critères de sélection a été la relation que certains artistes entretiennent avec d’autres cultures, soit simplement du fait de leur naissance (Nam June Paik ou Shirazeh Houshiary), soit parce qu’ils montrent, dans leur oeuvre, un intérêt pour d’autres civilisations. Et puis, un certain nombre d’artistes se retrouvent là parce que leur oeuvre est une réflexion sur notre propre culture, sur ce qu’elle représente pour eux : Kiefer, par exemple. Enfin, figurent au nombre des participants des artistes qui n’avaient jamais eu l’occasion d’aller à la rencontre de ces autres, mais dont on pouvait deviner que c’était quelque chose qui les intriguait. Par exemple, Tony Cragg ou Claes Oldenburg” (Martin and Francblin 1989:36).

¹⁰ Martin notes his aversion to the “official” selection of artists in his interview with Buchloh (1989). Martin's idea for *Magiciens* was originally formulated when he was named curator of the Paris Biennale. The Biennale had been modeled on the Venice Biennale, where individual nations were invited to send their own selection of artists. Martin claims this was one of the “worst mistakes” of the Paris Biennale. National governments, he states, “chose only those artists who, in their opinion, deserved the official stamp of cultural and political authority” with the result being “a disaster of officious and official culture” (Martin and Buchloh 1989:152).

“the important point was that we would only invite artists who one of us had met, checked on the spot, and had seen what their work meant in the context.” As he told Benjamin Buchloh, he and his curators would then be guided by their own “artistic intuition,” their “own history” and “own sensibility” (Martin and Buchloh 1989:152) as they experienced the art *in situ*. In his interview with me, Martin admitted the obvious Western bias of this selection process, but claimed that the process was also expedient:

Again, one of the criticisms of *Magiciens de la Terre* was that it was all made by white European males. My answer is very simple. If I had to gather representatives of all the different cultures and continents, the show would have never appeared. Can you imagine, first of all, how you would find someone? For China I had the chance to meet Fei Dawei, but in the Pacific who should I choose? In Papua New Guinea? Or in Africa? And then if I had found such persons it would have taken several years to come to a sort of level where we could find an agreement. So the show would have never happened.

To counter his team’s lack of cultural background, and to address practical considerations such as language differences and finding artists in foreign nations, Martin solicited the aid of ethnologists, anthropologists, and people who had a connection with the local artistic field in the different countries. As Martin noted and as I discuss below, he consulted with art historian Fei Dawei about artistic production in China. Through consultation, he told Buchloh, he felt that his team could “understand the specialized activities of those artists [from outside the West] and the function of their formal and visual language” (Martin and Buchloh 1989:152-53).

While he did not seek out new artists from the West, or provocative and dissident qualities in their work, Martin was intent upon “discovering”

the new and the original in his selection of the unknown artists. As he noted in our interview, most of his colleagues depended on finding artists through exhibition records or by looking at magazines. Martin, on the other hand, wanted to assure authenticity and make new “discoveries.” As he described in our interview, “we were very often quite disappointed with what we found, but then, through network systems [in each country], we would discover another artist. It was a sort of crazy research.”

It was not only the newness of the artists that interested Martin, but also how they demonstrated artistic singularity. In his catalogue essay, Martin explained that his “task was to find and isolate those individuals for their *particular creative quality* [my emphasis]” (Martin 1989:10).¹¹ As Martin elaborated in his interview with Buchloh, “I am interested in finding the individual artist or artists that one can really name and situate and that have actually produced objects” (Martin and Buchloh 1989:157). For this reason he was not interested in “schools” or groups, or “objects which claim to be the anonymous result of a cultural community” (1989:157). At the same time, Martin did not want to fall into the colonialist assumption that all cultural crafts, such as ritual masks or carvings, are produced without original authors. His team sought out artists who demonstrated something singular and original in their work. As Martin elaborated in the catalogue, “if 50 craftspeople produce more or less the same type of cult object, that does not interest me. I am looking for the *one that is more original than the rest*

¹¹ From the French. My translation. “La tâche a consisté à trouver et à isoler ces individus pour leur particulière qualité créative” (Martin 1989:10).

[my emphasis]" (1989:157).¹² In other words, he was also looking for artists who somehow transgressed the boundaries of the conventional within their own local artistic space.

Martin's selection of the Chinese artists for *Magiciens de la Terre* demonstrates how he and his team distinguished the singular originality of unknown artists. In 1986, Fei Dawei, who had studied art history at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing, happened to be in Paris on an academic exchange sponsored by the French government (Fei 2009). Fei had taken part in the Zhuhai conference in August 1986 where the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* was initiated and later assisted with the exhibit. Through his participation in the avant-garde movement in China, he had acquired a huge collection of slide images of Chinese avant-garde art.¹³ Martin heard that Fei was giving lectures on Chinese avant-garde art, and Martin arranged to see him. They spent several days together reviewing the slides and discussing the art situation in China (Fei 2009). Martin made a preliminary selection of works and artists he wanted to see and then made a trip to China in 1987, just after he was appointed director of MNAM. On Fei's suggestion, and in keeping with Martin's aim to avoid official channels for selection, Martin decided it was best not to make an "official" trip to China in his capacity as the head of a major European museum. Martin wanted to be free

¹² Martin cites Esther Mahlangu of the Ndebele culture in South Africa who takes the traditional practice of painting decorative designs on homes as an example (Martin and Buchloh 1989:157).

¹³ In a 2009 video interview, Fei Dawei explains the circumstances of his invitation to France. Fei Dawei arrived in Paris with approximately 1,200 slides of avant-garde art and a few images of "official" art (Fei 2009).

to visit without interference, and so he made what he told me was a “*voyage clandestine*,” organized by the Friends of China Association in France and Fei Dawei. Once in China, Fei (and others such as curator Hou Hanru) guided Martin to studios in five different cities (Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wangzhou, Beijing, Xiamen).

Martin visited numerous artists, viewing their work in their homes, which often also served as studios. It was from these visits that he personally selected Huang Yong Ping, Gu Dexin, and Yang Jiechang. In my interview, Martin explained his choice of these three artists. In each case, Martin describes a contrast between the familiar and the different, between his Westernized “artistic intuition,” “history” and “sensitivity” (Martin and Buchloh 1989:152) and the cultural differences he found *in situ*.

Huang Yong Ping [...] knew about Dada and a little bit about Duchamp. This is what interested me the most in Western art, this sort of dialectic of Dadaist work where you can turn everything into something different....You had the feeling he knew about [John] Cage and Marcel Duchamp. It was very interesting that he would explain these ideas in terms of Taoism, not in terms of Dada or the history of Dada, which he knew very little. He had this possibility to compare these two cultures, which has been his main concern even today. Very often he plays off this bilateral dualism between the two cultures. And really there was such a humor in his work, and the fact that he was playing with chance; chance has a big role in many of his works and all of that was familiar with what I was looking for in Western art. It was perfect.

I visited Gu Dexin in a very small room, like the *chambres d'étudiants* [student residences] we have in Paris, and it was filled with canvases leaning against one another. He had just a very small corner for a bed and a little table. He started to show me work. He had hundreds of watercolours, works on paper, canvases and so on, but constantly I was looking at what was on the walls. On his walls he had these very strange knots made out of some sort of strings of coloured plastic. He had put these on the wall and they were so strange, something I had

never seen before, and so surprising, that I asked him to tell me about them. Then, he was absolutely, infinitely happy because he was expecting me to ask to see canvases. I told you what my little problem was, that most of them [the Chinese artists he visited] were just doing painting, and here I had a guy who was actually a worker in a plastic factory. He used to take what was coming out of the machine at the end of the day, the rubbish, and he liked to shape and make sculptures out of it. So our connection was strong right away because he understood that I liked what he thought nobody would understand.

The third artist, Yang Jiechang, I was very interested in because I had the feeling that he had a really historical point of view. In general, you had the feeling that the Cultural Revolution had really erased everything and killed everything and that there was no past [in China]. With him, I had the feeling that he still had a sense of history, and that he was trying to rebuild something in his work from the past. I saw some very deep paintings in his studio at that time. Unfortunately, I asked him to do something similar in *Magiciens de la Terre* but he changed, he is a strange character because he has changed.... So on purpose he made something different when he came to Paris. I liked very much the paintings he had made with coins [the work Martin saw in China], you know the Chinese coins with the hole in the middle. He had taken, I guess, moulds for these coins and he had enlarged them to a huge size. I found that very interesting and so this is why I chose him....They were paintings but referring to some past object, some part of the history of China, and then he made paintings which were almost monochrome, where he had mixed all sorts of products from the Chinese pharmacy, sort of an alchemistic work.

Artistically, as Martin describes it, these three artists each manifested "originality" through different cultural contrasts with familiar Western art practices: Huang demonstrated a biculturalism in his use of Taoism with Western conceptual art, Gu demonstrated an unexpected spontaneity in his use of mundane universal material that differs substantially from anything recognizably Chinese, and Yang attempted to rebuild Chinese history by mixing Chinese and Western media in a familiar approach to collage and abstraction. In each case, Martin emphasizes the "exotic" or cultural difference of the artist's work.

In our interview, Martin also indicated that he was very aware of how the experimental artworks of young avant-garde artists, such as Huang, Yang, and Gu, were challenging the conventional artistic practices in China at the time. Even before meeting Fei Dawei and visiting China, Martin knew that the political situation within China and between China and the West had limited the artists' access to information on contemporary art. When asked in our interview for his thoughts on the difference between the art he saw in China and the West, he responded:

Of course it was something completely different. For me the most important thing, compared to Europe or North America, was that they [the Chinese artists] were all painting. In Europe and in North America there was conceptual art, installation, environmental, and video art was starting. I mean there were all these new techniques and they [the Chinese artists] did not have any access to that and had very little idea what was happening in Europe, in the Western world. So in this regard it looked to me very traditional, very conventional in the techniques used, with a few exceptions like Huang Yong Ping.

Having previously visited Russia and studied Soviet art, Martin was also familiar with the Soviet model of artistic regulation that China had adopted. He was aware of how these regulations had constrained artists but, through his visit, also saw how recent changes in China had encouraged new forms of expression that were not always representative of "official" Chinese culture. When asked about his impressions of the Chinese artistic scene in our interview, he responded:

[In China] I had an impression of an incredible boiling youth. They did not care about the Party and the politics; they just wanted to explode. They had all these ideas and they were very eager, of course, to talk to me. We had endless discussions at night about art, nature, and politics, and I had this feeling that there was an incredible potential there and it just needed to express itself. I was always actually

comparing it with Russia. I had a very good knowledge of Russia as I had been in Russia very often. I was one of the curators of *Paris-Moscow* [exhibit] at the Centre Pompidou.

Still, his introduction to this “incredible boiling youth” came, in large part, from the efforts of the artists themselves to “hail” the attention of the West through exhibitions like *China/Avant-Garde* and through their emissary, Fei Dawei. When asked in our interview if he had looked at art other than “avant-garde” work, Martin replied:

Fei Dawei was a fantastic informer about this new art and his generation and this sort of avant-garde art, but very reluctant to introduce me to some artists of calligraphy because he said all of them are completely compromised by politics and power. We went to see some of them nevertheless.

In choosing the Chinese artists for *Magiciens*, Martin found their singularity not only in their cultural difference, but also in their dissident relationship to official art. It was this combination of two transgressive features – one directed at challenging the Western art paradigm and the other at challenging the limitations of the Chinese artistic field – that appears to have appealed to Martin’s curatorial sensibility and that he saw as singularly original.

Endorsed by Martin, Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, and Gu Dexin were given their international debut in Paris at *Magiciens de la Terre*. Their singularity and authenticity, however, like that of the other artists from outside the West, hinged on the reaction to the controversial contrast proposed by the exhibition itself. In my documentary research, I found that for all its supposed controversy, the pre-show press and reviews of *Magiciens*

de la Terre were less negative than expected, but that they did contribute to distinguishing the transgressive alterity of the non-Western artists. At least a month prior to the opening, art journals and the French and international press carried stories and interviews about the show. For example, *artpress* and *Art in America*, the two most important contemporary art journals in France and the United States respectively, ran feature articles and interviews dedicated to *Magiciens* in their May issues. None of these focused on the Western artists. Rather, they emphasized the novelty of the non-Western artists by asking why Martin chose to include them, how he selected them, and what he was expecting as a response to the show. *Artpress* even included a selection of short interviews with four of the non-Western artists, including Huang Yong Ping. The artists were asked five questions:

1. Have you exhibited outside of your country before?
2. Is this exhibit important to you, why, and what do you expect from it?
3. Does the work you plan to show reference some theme or story from your country, your family, or yourself? What themes or story?
4. Do you know any other artists who are showing with you in Paris? Which ones?
5. What do you think of the title of the exhibition, *Magiciens de la terre*? (*artpress-Cinq questions 1989:48-49*).¹⁴

¹⁴ From the French. My translation. "1. Avez-vous déjà exposé hors de votre pays et où? 2. Cette exposition est-elle importante pour vous? Pourquoi? Qu'en attendez-vous? 3. L'oeuvre ou les oeuvres que vous exposez fait-elle référence à des thèmes ou à une histoire propre à votre pays, à votre famille ou à vous-même? Quels thèmes ou quelle histoire? 4. Connaissez-vous certains des autres artistes qui exposent avec vous à Paris? Lesquels? 5. Que pensez-vous du titre de l'exposition: 'Magiciens de la terre'?" (*artpress-Cinq questions 1989:48-49*). The artists interviewed were Huang Yong Ping (China), Cildo Meireles (Brazil), Mestre Didi (Brazil) and Boujemâa Lakhdar (Morocco).

The questions, like those in the pre-show press, indicate a curiosity about the foreign Others invited into the show but, at the same time, reinforce the artists' difference in contrast to well-recognized Western artists. The third question, especially, assumes that unlike their Western counterparts the conceptual basis of the artists' work will relate to their cultural identity rather than artistic or world issues.

Other articles on the show focused on the political dimension of including non-Western artists in the exhibition and, in keeping with the bicentennial theme, considered the universalism of this inclusion. For example, Nicolas Bourriaud in *artpress* referred to the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel to discuss the merging of different artistic languages. He wondered if "this Babelian confrontation of all cultures presupposes that art is a universal language" (1989:42) and whether "we really understand the mental and visual universe of a Tibetan, even when we have trouble knowing the signs addressed to us by our own artists?" (1989:42).¹⁵ On the whole, the preliminary press showed a respect for Martin and a curiosity, rather than an animosity, towards the exhibition and the new artists.

After the exhibit, the media was more divergent and critical but not overly negative. The positive reviews again addressed the bicentennial theme from the perspective of the artistic field by focusing on the exhibition's

¹⁵ From the French. My translation. "Cette confrontation babélique de toutes les cultures présuppose que l'art est un langage universel." "Pouvons-nous réellement comprendre l'univers mental et visuel d'un Thibétain, alors que nous saisissons avec peine les signaux que nous adressent nos propres artistes?" (Bourriaud 1989:42).

attempt to provoke a discussion about post-colonialism and address the inequities of the artistic field (Bartil 1989; Bouisset and Thomas 1989; Nuridsany 1989). Michel Nuridsany, writing for *Le Figaro*, endorsed the very egalitarian and democratic premise of the show (1989). *Beaux-Arts Magazine* printed two reviews, one supportive and the other critical. The writers of the supportive review praised the exhibition “for its generosity, its internationalism” and considered the exhibit to be the one “single event to truly celebrate the bicentenary of the Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man” (Bouisset and Thomas 1989:44).¹⁶

The negative responses, on the other hand, all focused on the aesthetic and ethical appropriateness of juxtaposing established Western artists with artists from outside of the West (Bertrand and Bataillon 1989; Dagen 1989; Heartney 1989). Eleanor Heartney’s description of the Halle at the La Villette provides a vivid picture of what so incensed some critics:

One feels at times as if one had wandered into an ethnographic museum or one of those grand 19th-century expositions of art and culture. This impression is enhanced by the presence in the Grand Hall of a variety of re-creations of traditional religious and ceremonial structures. There is, for instance, an intricately carved house whose centerpiece is an elaborate mandala from Nepal which was created by three Buddhist monks laboriously blowing colored sand through straws [...] Nearby the facade of a Benin voodoo house provides the backdrop for an arrangement of cult statues whose work’s creator, Cyprien Tokoudagba, found it necessary to sacrifice a chicken (in

¹⁶ From the French. My translation. “Pour la générosité d’un projet qui entend donner au mot ‘international’ sa vraie valeur cette capacité d’accueil d’un ensemble hétéroclite de différentes visions du monde. Pour l’événement, le seul vraiment à la hauteur de la célébration du Bicentenaire de la Révolution et de la Déclaration des droits de l’Homme” (Bouisset and Thomas 1989:44).

private) to ensure that the higher powers would not be angered by the inclusion of these magical objects in an art show (1989:92).

The introduction of what appeared to be ritual practices within the space of contemporary art set up a shocking contrast. Critics wondered how Western visitors were expected to understand the aesthetics of such work when it was presented as contemporary art, and critics expressed concern over the ethical issue of introducing such work into a space where it might be objectified and even belittled. Heartney, for example, noted that a lack of information about the ritual or traditional nature of the works left the audiences to “apply preexisting Western esthetic standards to objects where such standards are irrelevant” (1989:92). The critical review in *Beaux-Arts Magazine* claimed the exhibit was perpetuating a “grave ethical problem” (Bertrand and Bataillon 1989:44) and asked “how can one show tantric painting, a Tibetan mandala, and Aboriginal sand paintings according to the same criteria of presentation as the work of our Occidental stars?” (44). This review also questioned the moral implication of presenting such artists to meet “the West’s insatiable need for novelty and strong emotions” or as “an amusement, a fertile territory from which to shamelessly draw new resources” (1989:44).¹⁷ The writers also proposed that the exhibit “trivializes” the sacred work and empties it of its original and intended

¹⁷ From the French. My translation. “C’est l’Occident qui parle, qui clame son insatiable besoin de nouveautés, d’émotions fortes.” “En effet, comment peut-on montrer des peintures tantriques, un mandala tibétain, des peintures sur écorces aborigènes selon les mêmes critères de présentation que les oeuvres de nos stars occidentales?” and “Pour lui, l’Autre est soit un divertissement, soit un territoire fertile où puiser sans vergogne de nouvelles ressources” (Bertrand and Bataillon 1989:44).

significance (1989:44). The most acerbic review, written by Philippe Dagen in *Le Monde*, very pointedly compared *Magiciens* to the 1889 Paris World Fair, where European visitors were enthralled by the exotic display of replica “Javanese huts” and “Toureg encampments” from the colonies. Dagen did not hesitate to suggest that *Magiciens* treated the artists “with as much carelessness and disrespect as the 1889 exhibit” and proposed that if the exhibit was a success, it was so only as a spectacle hosted by a French television station and a Japanese newspaper (Dagen 1989).¹⁸

The “scandalized” response to *Magiciens* is just the kind of questioning that Martin appears to have wanted to provoke. In his comments above, he was interested in creating a shock that would instigate a

¹⁸ From the French. My translation. “C’était il y a un siècle, à l’Exposition universelle de 1889. Les visiteurs allaient avec ravissement du pavillon javanais au village canaque, du campement touareg à la case d’Afrique. Moulages de Borobudur, ‘fétiches’ papous et guinéens, peuples de ‘nos colonies’ : partout, des bizarreries et des nouveautés, des reconstitutions et des simulacres disposés de manière à composer une plaisante promenade pour le flâneur. La géographie, l’ethnographie, l’histoire des religions et des arts étaient bien un peu mises à mal. Nul n’essayait de comprendre objets et coutumes, mais le pittoresque avait, lui, son apothéose. Succès immense. Afflux de visiteurs. Une belle exposition, vraiment...” and “Le spectacle que donnent ces ‘Magiciens’ est superbe, sans doute, incongru, amusant peut-être. Il doit plaire. Il plait. Mais ce n’est qu’un spectacle, sponsorisé naturellement par une télévision française et un journal japonais. Or, s’il n’y a aucun inconvénient à mettre au programme ces ‘guest stars’ habitués des plateaux que sont messieurs Alberola, Boulatov, Clemente, Cucchi, Haacke et Sarkis, qui tous maîtrisent l’exercice pour l’avoir cent fois pratiqué dans toutes les Kunsthalle d’Occident, la chose n’est point si simple pour d’autres. Les ‘autres’, ceux de Yuendumu, Androka, Mueda et Apangai, aborigènes, malgaches, makonde et papou, dans quelle opération les a-t-on généreusement invités ? En exposant ensemble, côte à côte, pêle-mêle, leurs travaux, ne les a-t-on pas traités avec autant d’imprudence et d’irrespect que leurs aïeux en 1889?” (Dagen 1989).

disagreement over what is and is not art. At the same time, Martin carefully tempered this shock through his inclusion of a set of artists who appeared to transcend the most “scandalized refusals” of the exhibit. This is best explained in French critic Christine Rugemer’s review. *Magiciens de la Terre*, Rugemer points out, is actually shaped by a contrast of not two but three different sets of artists (1989). Rugemer identifies what she calls three “tribes” in the show (506). The first “tribe” is the “Western or Westernized artists who appear in all of the exhibitions and universal shows such as Oldenburg, Alberola, Cucchi, Boltanski, Haacke, Byars, Polke, Spoerri” (506). In this group, Rugemer also includes a few “less well-known” artists such as Zush, Jean-Pierre Bertrand, and Per Kirkeby from Spain, France, and Denmark, respectively, who were, at the time, relatively new to big international mega-exhibits. My review of the exhibition catalogue reveals that a full 50 percent of the artists in *Magiciens* form this first “tribe” (Appendix III). The second “tribe” consists of the artists from outside the West – from Africa, India, China, Brazil, and Mexico – who have had experience with Western art practices but have not yet been recognized outside of their own countries. Here I include the three Chinese artists. Rugemer suggests that these artists were already looking to the West and that inclusion in a show in Paris would “represent the realization of a certain dream” (506). In my estimation, this category of artists made up 31 percent of the exhibition. Finally, the third “tribe,” and the smallest group at 19 percent, represents “the displaced people,” the “ethnically other” whose

work was “impregnated with the signs and significations of the sacred” (Rugemer 506).¹⁹ These were artists, such as the Tibetan monks Lobsang Thinle, Lobsang Palden, and Bhorda Sherpa, or Mike Chukwukelu from Nigeria, who had apparently been whisked from their native villages in order to recreate their ritualistic art in the heart of Paris for the benefit of the international art world. It was the inclusion of this latter “tribe,” as the reviews indicate, that generated the most contention and greatest “refusal.” Showcased, as they were, next to the standard bearers of postmodern contemporary art, such as Hans Haacke and Barbara Kruger, it was these artists who appeared the most shockingly different, “primitive,” and in the sense I have used here, artistically dissident – that is, their work was the most unconventional in relation to the norm of contemporary art. Even Yang Jiechang, who had seen very little Western art at the time, remarked in our interview that his impression of *Magiciens* was “so much folk art.”

Using the exhibition as his canvas, so to speak, Martin set up three different groups that together appear to follow a version of Heinrich’s dialectical triad of transgression, reaction, and integration. Rugemer’s “third

¹⁹ From the French. My translation. “Celles des Occidentaux ou occidentalisés, grands habitués de toutes les exhibitions et mostra universelles, tels Oldenburg, Alberola, Cucchi, Boltanski, Haacke, Byars, Polke, Spoerri et les autres (et aussi de plus secrets comme Zush, Bertrand ou Kirkeby). Celles des artistes que l’on pourrait dire populaires (dont le Zaïrois Chéri Samba incarne un tonique exemple, qui opérant dans des villes ou villages en contact permanent avec l’Occident, et dont on peut imaginer que la ‘montée à Paris’ représente la réalisation d’un certain rêve. Et puis, les ‘personnes déplacées’. Cette troisième ethnie autrement singulière formée de ceux qui oeuvrent encore, chez eux, tout imprégnés de significations et de signes sacrés” (Rugemer 1989:506).

tribe” plays the transgressive hand in that the artists’ bold (but unintended) “primitive” difference to conventional contemporary art practices contrasted sharply with the norm established by the Western artists. On the whole, the Western artists were unremarkable, especially in contrast to the other two groups. It is likely for this reason that little was said about the Western artists in the reviews. Most critics appeared to concur, either through comments or by their silence, with Michael Brenson of the *New York Times*, who stated,

the selection of Western artists is questionable. While the exhibition is presented as open and fresh, many of the Americans and Europeans – including Sigmar Polke, Enzo Cucchi, Anselm Kiefer, John Baldessari, Tony Cragg, Daniel Buren, Rebecca Horn, Christian Boltanski, and Francesco Clemente – are veterans of the international art wars (1989).

Having already won their “war,” the Western artists were no longer significantly “exceptional” and only appear to provide the necessary contrast that inspires a reaction. Rugemer’s “second tribe” (the one that included the Chinese artists), on the other hand, forms an integrative synthesis. These artists demonstrated enough similarities along with the dissident difference found in their cultural Otherness that they were perceived as more convincingly contemporary. As Martin noted about the Chinese artists in our interview, they created work (Figures 4 & 5) that was

easy to compare to Western art. It did not have this sort of – what annoyed many people – this primitive or folk art look that made so many people say that Jean-Hubert Martin has chosen craftsmen and not artists, that sort of stupid idea. Huang Yong Ping you could right away compare with Dadaist works. Yang Jiechang was actually taken by one of the major galleries in Paris, Jeanne Bucher, because this sort of black painting could compare to fashionable trends in Western art

at the same time. Gu Dexin was also showing in galleries here afterwards because of his strange materials. There was something very risky, adventurous in the way he dealt with these materials.



Figure 4. Huang Yong Ping, *Reptile*, 1989. Installation view, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. © Huang Yong Ping/SODRAC (2015).



Figure 5. Yang Jiechang pictured at *Les Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition with his work, *Hundred Layers of Ink*, 1989, Centre Pompidou, Paris. Photo courtesy of the artist. © Yang Jiechang.

American critic Eleanor Heartney appears to have concurred. As she wrote in her review, the “most interesting works in the show [...] were produced by non-Western artists conversant with the subtleties of Western art and culture and interested in the interplay between these traditions and their own” (1989:93). While she cites artists like Hiroshi Teshigahara and Rasheed Araeen, who had already been recognized in the artistic field (and who I included among the Western artists), she finds a refreshing originality in how the alterity of their cultural identity plays with and against both Western and non-Western conventions. These artists are difficult to fix on either side of the contrast, as Michel Nuridsany of *Le Figaro* appears to suggest in his praise of Zairian artist Chéri Samba: “In what world does Chéri Samba belong, one of the most interesting artists in the show, who intervenes in the same territory as Barbara Kruger but with more originality, less self-satisfaction, less renown?”²⁰ (Nuridsany 1989).

Like Martin, Heartney also recognizes the special incongruity of the Chinese artists and how their artwork plays against the artistic conventions and political situation in China. Citing Huang and Gu, Heartney writes that they are in “a class of their own” and “are truly outside narrowly defined official Chinese culture” (93).²¹ For both Heartney and Martin, the Chinese

²⁰ From the French. My translation. “A quel monde appartient Chéri Samba l’un des artistes les plus intéressants de exposition, qui intervient sur le même territoire que Barbara Kruger mais avec plus d’invention, moins de fatuité et moins de renommée?” (Nuridsany 1989)

²¹ Heartney also mentions that “art officials in China were upset to discover that more traditionally trained artists had been passed over by the Paris

artists are distinguished not only for their use of Western art practices, but also for how these practices situate them at the edges of “official” culture in China. By recognizing and mediating this political difference, the curator and the critic both validate the dissident capacity of Chinese art.

With *Magiciens de la Terre*, Martin succeeded on several fronts. He created an exhibit that can be understood as an artistic event (Heinich 2000) in that it truly did create a disagreement and shift in the “categories of art,” as critics and historians have since admitted (Heartney 2000; Greenberg 2005; Steeds et la 2013). At the same time, the exhibit established the identity difference of non-Western artists as a valuable artistic asset and qualifying attribute for contemporary art. How this value plays against Western artistic conventions and political values is what makes identity art, Chinese or otherwise, both artistic and political. Chinese artists, however, were also identified as being in a “class of their own” for distinguishing themselves from the “official” culture in China. Both Martin and Heartney remarked on this difference but do not spell out the specifics in relation to the Chinese artists featured in *Magiciens*. Moreover, none of the three Chinese artists featured in *Magiciens* addressed a Chinese political issue in their work. The signifying difference appears to lie in the tension between what is understood in the West as a censorious state in China where artistic practice is highly regulated and unfree, and a liberal and free West where the artistic practice is highly permissive and transgressive. Through its three-part

exhibition organizers in favour of these two who are considered extremely marginal” (1989:93).

contrast of artists from around the world, *Magiciens de la Terre* opened the doors of the art world, and opened the way for considering the politically dissident dimension of Chinese art.

The political difference between China and the West was also represented and reinforced by the bicentennial parade on the evening of July 14, 1989 – almost two months after the opening of *Magiciens de la Terre* and a little over a month after the tragic events of June 4 in Beijing. The bicentennial parade, like *Magiciens de la Terre*, was a spectacular event that relied on contrasts between the West (here represented by France) and its Others. Both events introduced, and literally transported Others into French political space and made them the thematic highlight.²² The parade, however, was designed from the beginning as a political statement meant to convey not the value of dissident difference but how such difference may be united in the “fraternity” of a universal liberal democracy (Leruth 1995;1998; Kaplan 1995). The creative direction of the parade was assigned to Jean-Paul Goude, an artist who had worked in the advertising industry in the United States and France. The directive Goude was given was simple but almost impossibly broad. He was asked to focus on the theme of fraternity, feature the French national anthem, the *Marseillaise*, represent all the provinces of France, and “do it all on the Champs-Elysées” (Kaplan

²² Many of the performers, such as an African-American marching band from A&M University in Florida, were brought to Paris especially for the parade. In other cases, performers were drawn from Paris’ immigrant community. Before the Tiananmen Square incident, the parade’s director Jean-Paul Goude planned to bring Chinese performers to France (Leruth 1995; 1998).

1995:281). Adding further pressure and distinction to the event was the fact that François Mitterrand, along with the G7 leaders and 26 other global heads of state, would be watching from premier seats at the Place de la Concorde (Kaplan 1995:305). Thus, unlike *Magiciens*, which focused primarily on the artistic field and those interested in it, the parade was a very public celebration that was intended to affect a significant political statement about the Mitterrand government and its goals for universalizing French liberal-democratic values around the globe (Kaplan 1995:38-39). Staged on the French national holiday, Bastille Day, the parade was the culminating highlight of the yearlong celebration, and expectations were high as “the cameras of the entire world” were “focused on Paris” (Kaplan 1995:270).

Like Jean-Hubert Martin, Goude drew his inspiration for the parade from his own experience with cultural contrast. Goude came to the project with an inordinate fascination with African culture and music, both of which figured prominently in the artistic design of the parade (Kaplan 1995:274-281).²³ It was this cultural mix, or *métissage*, that defined the parade, which was also billed as a “festival of the world’s tribes” (Leruth 1998:55). The final design for the parade, as Leruth describes it, was a “combination of procession and stationary concert” (Leruth 1995:7). The parade consisted of 12 tableaux, seven representing France, one each for England, the US, USSR,

²³ Kaplan describes Goude’s artistic background at length in order to explain Goude’s extraordinary interest in African culture. While living and working in New York in the 1970s, Goude produced a book entitled *Jungle Fever*, which featured a series of photomontages of black women, including the singer Grace Jones (Kaplan 1995:276-280).

and China (all countries that had had a revolution), and one tableau dedicated to the nations of Africa (Leruth 1995:7-16). Each tableau comprised musicians, dancers, and singers who were aurally linked by the persistent beat of drums and visually linked by the predominance of the French tri-colour flag and the repeated presence of dark-skinned people. Midway through the two-and-a-half-hour procession, African American soprano Jessye Norman joined the parade in the Place de la Concorde. Appearing like a black Marianne (the female personification of the French Republic) (Leruth 1995:221), Norman rose high above the crowd on a hidden elevator, from where she sang the French anthem, *La Marseillaise*. Norman's singing of the anthem was, as Leruth notes, the "parade's only direct reference to the Revolution" (1998: 55). The theme of "fraternity," on the other hand, was represented repeatedly through Goude's playful mixing of different world cultures and the obvious stereotypes that these engendered.

In Leruth's analysis, Goude employed two key devices: *décalage* and *métissage*. These devices set up a sharp contrast between France and its Others, but at the same time united them through aesthetic synthesis, humor, and music. Leruth defines *décalage* as the "playful inflection, or 'troping' of national stereotypes" (1998:57). Goude used *décalage* in three ways: by combining disparate stereotypes within the same tableau, by making contrasts between different time periods, and by using *métissage*, or cultural mixing. For example, different stereotypical images – sailors from the

Battleship Potemkin with an ice-skating Russian bear – were combined in the Russian tableau. In this same tableau, the USSR, past and present, was represented through the juxtaposition of a “back to the future’ vision of the ‘new’ Soviet Union of *glasnost*” with the early Russian avant-garde Constructivist movement (1998:58). But, as Leruth points out, the most “daring and controversial” use of the *décalage* was Goude’s “cross-breeding of cultures” (1998:58), or *métissage*. Thus, as Leruth describes it:

The British tableau provides perhaps the best example of this technique. At the centre of the tableau, classical Indian dancers (immigrants in Britain?) performed the 'Baharta Natya' to the same discothèque 'house music' mix as the sneeze dancers [the motif was the head cold]. This trendy and multicultural assembly, in turn, was given a very British escort by the Royal Tattoo (1998:58).

Goude’s cross-breeding of the French was even more pronounced. The most startling and impressive tableau in this regard was one titled “Arabs of Paris.” Here 15 “Maghrebian waltzers” (Leruth 1995:11) representing Paris were transported upon moveable carts hidden under massive 2.5-meter skirts as they twirled and danced along the parade route. Each of the giant women held a child dressed in a stereotypical national costume. For example, Japan was represented by a Samurai outfit and Canada by the red serge of the RCMP (Leruth 1995:11). The result was a highly political and loaded symbol of “fraternity” – a female Arabic personification of France embracing all others – but at the same time it was one that used humor and aesthetics to diffuse the more contentious contrasts. As Leruth points out, the “dominant tone” of the parade and its theme of fraternity

was one of irony and tender parody. The implicit moral of such tongue-in-cheek caricature was that the nations of the world and France's own cultural 'tribes' would get along better if they could learn to laugh at the way they typically look at one another (Leruth 1998:57).

The contrasting "tribes" then were synthesized and united throughout the parade by music. As Leruth notes, music was Goude's "major vehicle for cultural cross-breeding" (1998:58), and world music, rather than the revolution, appeared to be the true theme of the parade. As Goude candidly admitted, "for me, the whole idea of this parade, which does not claim to represent the Rights of Man, is the advent of a global sound" (in Leruth 1998:58).²⁴ Thus, even the French regional tableau, titled "The Tribes of France," featured musicians in regional dress playing a composition by Franco-African composer Wally Badarou, which combined African rhythms with regional folk music (Leruth 1995:10). The parade then provided the perfect follow-up for the controversy initiated by *Magiciens*. It soothed jarring differences through music and humor and proposed that all nations and cultures could come together under one identity – that of liberal democracy.

While not evident in the majority of the parade, the revolutionary theme of the bicentennial was introduced as part of a last-minute change to the program in response to the Tiananmen Square incident. In February 1989, Goude had travelled to China to recruit participants and prepare the

²⁴ From the French. My translation. "Pour moi toute l'idée de ce défilé, qui ne prétend pas mettre en scène les Droits de l'homme, c'est l'avènement d'une sonorité mondiale" (in Leruth 1998:58).

Chinese portion of the parade. As Kaplan explains, Goude was immediately “captivated by the traditional choreography of the Peking Opera” (1995:293). It was this musical form he wanted to combine with African beats and break-dancing for the China tableau. Working with a director of the Peking Opera, he recruited a troupe of dancers who “secretly practiced African American break steps” or, as Goude put it, “a revolutionary ballet glorifying the Long March to an Afro-Chinese beat” (Kaplan 1995:293). According to Goude, the Chinese portion of the show was the “most ambitious” and “the part that took the most time” (Kaplan 1995:293). Goude was again in China when the protests broke out in Beijing. After June 4, he wanted to cancel the Chinese portion of the parade altogether. Jack Lang, the Minister of Culture, however, stressed that “the Chinese should not feel forgotten, ‘that the moment had to be marked’” (Kaplan 1995:293). In the end, Goude made significant changes to the tableau.

After the Tiananmen Square incident, the representation of China contrasted starkly from the rest of the parade. Goude eliminated the break-dancers and moved the tableau to the front of the procession. The parade opened with 40 drummers, followed by 60 Italians dressed in colourful pantaloons and twirling lances with the French tri-colour flag. The face of each Italian was painted yellow, and the Chinese characters for the words liberty and democracy were painted on their bare chests (Leruth 1995:8; Kaplan 1995:305). The dancers were followed by a large silent red drum marked with the words liberty, equality, and fraternity and a “solemn cortege

of Chinese students” pushing bicycles (Kaplan 1995: 305). The only sound was a recorded musical piece that included the sound of bicycle bells in remembrance of the Beijing victims. The Chinese students were dressed in white and black (the colours of mourning) and wore white headbands inscribed with the words liberty and democracy. Some marchers wore masks to hide their identity and others carried a banner that read “Nous Continuons” (We Continue) (Leruth 1995:9). Unlike the other tableau, Goude eschewed the softening effect of musical *métissage* and playful irony, choosing instead to present a tableau that, after the extensive media coverage on the Tiananmen Square incident, could only be understood as a strong reprimand to China. Instead of emphasizing and aestheticizing cultural differences, the tableau illustrated to the world that China represented a “Bastille” that remained to be challenged. Needless to say, the Chinese government “strenuously protested” (Shambaugh 1992:110; Kaplan 1995:536) and, in so doing, provided the “scandalized refusal” that made the parade’s dissident gesture all the more powerful. Presented before an exceptionally large contingent of world leaders and televised around the world, the Chinese tribute had a profound effect on how the remainder of the parade would be read. With its solemnity and seriousness, the Chinese tableau contrasted sharply with the humorous and celebratory tenor of the rest of the parade. By initiating this provocative contrast, Goude successfully managed to challenge China *and* valorize the primary objective of the

bicentennial: the celebration of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

The events in the summer of 1989, in both China and in France, set the stage for distinguishing the dissident value of Chinese contemporary art. No one event can claim credit, but together they represent a constellation of discourses that emerge around the identity of Chinese artists as they are introduced in the West. While both *Magiciens* and the parade relied on cultural contrast, they each differed in the effects of their dissident gestures. As a singular artistic event, *Magiciens* succeeded in challenging the different categories of art and reinforced the artistic value of identity difference as a singular attribute for individual artists. As such, it celebrated and emphasized artistic and political difference. The parade, on the other hand, unified cultural and political difference through aestheticization. It celebrated this synthesis as the universalization of liberal democracy. The most transgressive difference in the parade – the representation of China – was contrasted with this ideal. Through this one dissident gesture the parade emphasized the very limits of liberal democracy and valorized political dissidence as an important liberal-democratic value. In a similar way, but with less assertiveness, *Magiciens* emphasized these same ideals when curators and critics recognized Chinese art as both artistically and politically dissident. Within the geo-political context of Paris in 1989, then, the recognition and value of Chinese art emerged against the ideological contrast of China's recent repression and France's declaration of freedom

and liberal democracy. Together these events provided the forum for recognizing the Chinese artist as dissident.

Chapter Four

Transition and Transformation

Coming to Paris in 1986, Chen Zhen passed a threshold of sorts. He left his wife and young child behind in China, travelled the great distance to a foreign country, and struggled for nearly three years to make ends meet. His objective was to see the art of Europe before succumbing to the hereditary blood disorder that was discovered in his body when he was 27. At 30, he was just beginning a new phase in his life. By 1989, inspired by what he had seen and learned during his three years in this new world, Chen Zhen created a whole new body of work, and in 1990 he was given his first significant solo exhibit. In the interview for this study, Chen Zhen's widow, Xu Min, recalls that curator Jérôme Sans told Chen Zhen, "In six months from now, you will not be the same Chen Zhen." These prophetic words signaled the final transformation that Chen Zhen would undergo as an artist. In just a few short years, he went from being an unknown itinerant artist in the city of Paris to being a Chinese contemporary artist recognized in France and internationally.

In this chapter, I consider the artistic transition and transformation of Chen Zhen and the other artists in this study as they moved from China to France in and around 1989. The aim of this chapter is to understand how the emerging idea of the Chinese dissident after the Tiananmen Square incident contributed to the validation of individual Chinese artists as they entered the contemporary art field. I take three integrated approaches to this analysis,

which bring together Bourdieu's consideration of the cultural field and how it operates, with Heinich's concept of artistic singularity and originality and how these are attributed. First, following Bourdieu's interpretation of social capital, I trace the artists' individual exhibition record and their relationships with specific art-world agents, taking these as objective indicators of their career development (Bourdieu 1986; 1989). In the art world, the exhibition is the premier ritual of legitimation. The artist's entry into these exhibits is mediated by the agents, most often curators, who, as knowledgeable and respected members of the art world, are invested with the power to name and consecrate artists – in other words, to recognize the artist's authenticity and singularity (Bourdieu 1993:120-125; Heinich 1998a; 2005:324-339; Michaud 2007).

Second, I consider the artwork itself and how this represents the artist's response to the demands of the field. The type of work an artist produces is important for situating the artist in the appropriate fraction of the field, whether amateur or professional, modern or contemporary. To gain entry into these fractions, an artist must have talent not only for crafting an object but also for understanding or sensing the demands of the field. For this reason, the artist's production can also be understood as a strategy, conscious or unconscious, for gaining recognition and legitimation (Bourdieu 1993:61-73). Once identified and categorized, artists and their work begin to accrue symbolic value, especially if they are vetted by important art-world agents and presented in prestigious exhibiting venues. As Bourdieu

proposes, symbolic value is the mis-recognition of capital – economic, cultural, and social – that supports the accreditation of an artist and the belief in the significance of the artist’s work (Bourdieu 1993:30-73). Thus, the symbolic value given to the work and the artist is a combination of a number of factors: the artist’s strategies in producing work; the social relationships that recognize these strategies; the exhibits that present the work to the public; public reaction; and, eventually, the economic value of the work.

Finally, I consider the texts produced by art-world agents. As Heinich has shown in her studies, art-world agents mediate the value of artists and artworks by introducing them and providing the discourse that validates their singular originality and difference (1998a:264-326). The curator, as an agent of the field, “discovers” the new artist, justifies the artist’s recognition by comparisons with art-historical precedents, and explains how the artist has surpassed (transgressed) some boundary – artistic, social, and/or political – through the production of his or her art (Heinich 1998a:2014). In this chapter, then, I compare the career trajectories of the different artists in relation to when they arrived in France; analyze how the artists responded, consciously or unconsciously, to the requirements of the field; and, in consideration of the number of artists in this study, take Chen Zhen’s career as an exemplary case study for a review of curatorial texts and art-world discourses.

Initially, all nine artists in this study – Chen Zhen, Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, Wang Keping, Ru Xiaofan, Wang Du, Shen Yuan, Yan Pei-Ming,

and Du Zhenjun – shared similar challenges in their transition from China to France. None of the artists had ever travelled outside of China, and only Shen Yuan had studied some French before leaving China. All of the artists needed to acquire visas and sufficient economic capital to travel to and live in France. Thus, all of the artists began with similar economic and cultural capital. It would be social capital – in the form of art world relationships – and each artist’s individual approach to their artistic production that would mark the most significant differences in their individual artistic transitions.

As related in the previous chapters, a number of events converging in the art world and the global political field in 1989 contributed to the recognition of the Chinese artist as dissident. The response to the Tiananmen Square incident in the West, the value placed on the artist’s identity in *Magiciens de la Terre*, and the recognition of an artistic avant-garde in China with the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit all provided significant context for the valorization of the Chinese artist as dissident. A comparison of the artists who arrived in France before 1989 with those who arrived that year and after provides then an instructive picture of how the events of 1989 affected the reception of their work and their individual artistic production.

Four artists in this study immigrated before 1989: Yan Pei-Ming in 1980, Ru Xiaofan in 1983, Wang Keping in 1984, and Chen Zhen in 1986. Three of these artists – Yan Pei-Ming, Ru Xiaofan, and Chen Zhen – were aided by family and friends and arrived in France anonymously, much like any immigrant. Of these three, Yan Pei-Ming had the least in terms of

cultural and social capital in that he had not yet completed his artistic education nor developed recognition as an artist in China. Ru Xiaofan and Chen Zhen, on the other hand, had completed their formal education and had held professional teaching positions in China. Their artistic credentials allowed them to enroll as graduate students in the Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, which also provided them with the visa needed to stay in France.¹ Still, their artistic experience did not gain them immediate recognition or entry into the most significant spheres of the contemporary field in France. Rather, they were able to employ their skills by teaching Chinese painting and by drawing tourist portraits in the street as a way of earning income while they established themselves in France. Yan Pei-Ming, on the other hand, began his life in France working in a factory, a job arranged by an uncle who was living in France. He eventually qualified to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Dijon, where he earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in fine art (Nuridsany 2004:47).

Of the four artists to emigrate before 1989, Wang Keping arrived in France with the most economic, social, and symbolic capital. As he related to me in our interview, Wang's French wife, Catherine Dezaly, had been teaching in China and had a job and a home to return to in France, which made Wang's transition into a new cultural environment much easier. Wang noted that he had held no other employment in France and did not need to enroll in an education program to acquire a visa. Also, Wang may have

¹ Yan Pei-Ming applied to this prestigious school in his first year in Paris but was not accepted (Nuridsany 2003:47).

benefited from his status as a dissident artist. His activities with the Stars (*Xingxing*) in Beijing in 1979 and 1980 were widely documented in the Western media. He also came to France shortly after the extensive media coverage surrounding another member of the Stars, Li Shuang, who had been imprisoned in China for her relationship with a foreigner, French diplomat Emmanuel Bellefroid. With government permission, Wang married Dezaly only two months after Li's imprisonment in December 1981 and then arrived in France not long after Li's internationally publicized 1983 arrival.² Wang's marriage was much less politically contentious but still made headlines in France.³ Soon after arriving, Wang found a gallery to represent him and, once in France, no longer produced politically contentious work, as I discuss below.

The initial careers of Huang Yong Ping and Yang Jiechang, the two artists who arrived in 1989 and who participated in *Magiciens de la Terre*, are markedly different from the artists who arrived before 1989 and those who arrived after. Unlike Yan Pei-Ming, Chen Zhen, and Ru Xiaofan, Huang and Yang arrived in France not as anonymous immigrants but as recognized artists. They came by invitation rather than by their own means, and some

² Li was released after French Foreign Minister Michel Jobert visited China in 1983, just before France and China were to celebrate 20 years of diplomatic relations. She was given permission to marry and to leave the country. She arrived in France in November 1983. See Anita Rind, "La libération de Mlle Li Shuang, L'épouser le plus vite possible," *Le Monde* (July 12, 1983); "Mlle Li Shuang est arrivée a Paris" *Le Monde* (Nov. 28, 1983); "Chinese Artist, Freed from Peking Jail, Joins Fiancé in Paris," *New York Times*, (Nov. 27, 1983).

³ On Wang's marriage, see "Un artiste chinois non conformiste a pu épouser une française," *Le Monde* (Jan 6, 1982).

very powerful people facilitated their way. The curator of *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, Jean-Hubert Martin, who was also the director of France's national museum of modern art, had met the artists in China in 1987. As a result, Martin, French diplomats, and important government officials such as Culture Minister Jack Lang facilitated the artists' journey from China to France as both Yang and Martin noted in interviews for this study.

Participation in the exhibit, presented as it was in a major contemporary art venue, also improved the artists' social capital. *Magiciens* set them into the very centre of the artistic field, where they were exposed to important French and international artists, curators, gallery directors, critics, and collectors. Immediately following the exhibit, the artists were offered exhibition opportunities, and important collectors purchased their work.⁴

Galerie Jeanne Bucher, one of the most established commercial galleries in Paris, approached Yang Jiechang and offered him a solo exhibit, while Huang Yong Ping was offered solo and group exhibits in France and internationally.⁵

⁴ Works by both artists were purchased by Canal +, a major sponsor of the exhibit, and by the national art museum at the Centre Georges Pompidou.

⁵ A solo exhibit of Huang's work, *Sacrifice au feu (Cézanne, Sainte-Victoire 1990)*, was presented at L'Ecole des Beaux-arts in Aix-en-Provence, Avignon, and Rouen. Huang's work was exhibited at the Galerie Fenster in Frankfurt, Akademie Schloss (1991), Solitude in Stuttgart (1993), Capp Street Project in San Francisco (1994), and in a dual exhibit with Chen Zhen, *Chinese Hand Laundry*, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1994). Huang's work also travelled back to Asia as part of a group exhibit of Chinese contemporary art, *Exceptional Passage* (1991), curated by Fei Dawei and presented at the Fukuoka Museum in Japan. Yang Jiechang was also part of this exhibit. Jean-Hubert Martin included Huang's work in an exhibit of French conceptual art, *Resistance* (1992), at the Watari-Um Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo.

The careers of Huang Yong Ping and Yang Jiechang also had a more direct correlation to the events in Beijing in May and June of 1989. They were in Paris at the time and both accepted asylum after the Tiananmen Square incident. Huang and Yang were not publically labeled as dissidents, but their choice to remain in France and not return to China after the incident easily appeared as a chosen exile. Still, how much of the artists' initial recognition and success in the art world is based on this coincidental situation is difficult to measure. Other artists in *Magiciens* from countries in Africa and South America also launched successful careers after the show, selling works and receiving exhibition offers.⁶ The Chinese artists, however, had the added benefit of an invitation to stay in Paris. As my interview with Huang Yong Ping indicated, accepting asylum meant receiving visas and the legal option for long-term residency. Huang Yong Ping also received a one-year government fellowship and assistance with finding studio and living space, benefits that had not been available to the Chinese artists who arrived before 1989.

The changing international perception of China after 1989 and the value given to artists with a Chinese identity helped to ease the immigration transition for the three artists who arrived after 1989: Shen Yuan, Wang Du, and Du Zhenjun. While the artists still had to acquire visas to enter France, French citizens aided them, and the artists and curators who had arrived before them, especially Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, Chen Zhen, and

⁶ For example, Bodys Isek Kingelez of Zaire, Cildo Meireles of Brazil, and Chéri Samba of Zaire went on to develop successful international careers.

curator Fei Dawei, served as a bridge into a social network that led directly to important curators and gallery owners in Paris and beyond. This supportive network had not been available to the artists who arrived before 1989. In my interviews all of the artists who arrived after 1989 commented on the mutual support and friendship they found among their Chinese peers. Shen Yuan came to join her husband, Huang Yong Ping, in 1990 and she and Xu Min, Chen Zhen's wife, went out together to do tourist portraits in the streets of Paris. Wang Du followed his French wife that same year, but his marriage fell apart shortly after he arrived. As he explained to me, Chen Zhen and Xu Min were an immense help at this time. He worked with Chen Zhen on some projects, slept in Chen Zhen's studio, and, as he explained, "I can't cook, so many times I had meals with Chen Zhen and Xu Min." Wang's first exhibits would also come through his French and Chinese relationships. Friends of his wife included some of his paintings in a group exhibit shortly after he arrived, and then Hou Hanru and his French wife and fellow curator, Evelyne Jouanno, organized a weekend exhibit in the Anne de Villepoix Gallery in 1994.⁷ Relationships with French friends and fellow Chinese artists also benefited Du Zhenjun. Du arrived in Bordeaux in 1991 with the aid of a French friend he had met in China. He too connected with the other Chinese

⁷ Wang Du's initial recognition in France may have resulted from his notoriety as a political "dissident." When he was jailed in China in 1989, his journalist wife made public pleas for French diplomatic intervention. See, for example, Patrice de Beer, "Chine: Une Française se bat pour la libération de son mari chinois," *Le Monde* (May 30, 1990) and "Wang Du, l'otage de Pékin: Il est marié à une Française et emprisonné à Canton. Le gouvernement chinois s'en sert comme moyen de chantage contre la France," *Le Nouvel Observateur* (June 7, 1990):68.

artists through Fei Dawei, who had once worked with him in the same factory in China. Together, then, the artists formed a small supportive coterie of Chinese artists living in Paris, one that helped them to overcome economic and cultural barriers as they developed their artistic careers. It was through their collective support that I was also able to make contact with the participant artists for this study.⁸

A comparison of the immediate recognition of Yang Jiechang and Huang Yong Ping in the artistic field with the slower progress of the artists who arrived in France before 1989 provides an instructive picture of how *Magiciens de la Terre* and the Tiananmen Square incident impacted the careers of the subject artists. Yan Pei-Ming (arrived in 1980) and Ru Xiaofan (arrived in 1983), for example, completed their art studies in France and followed a career trajectory typical of graduates of a French art program. All of their early exhibits (before 1989) were held in public museums and small galleries in France. Ru Xiaofan took part in several small group exhibits and in the large juried exhibition of abstract art, the *Salon des réalités nouvelles*. His work was also featured in the *Salon de la jeune peinture*. These types of exhibits, open to all artists working in France and based on jury selection, are typical first exhibit experiences for emerging artists. None of the group

⁸ Their camaraderie was also noted by a visiting Chinese scholar, Chen Dong (陈侗), who visited Paris in 2001. He includes a chapter, "Chinese Artists in France (在法国的中国艺术家)," in his book *My World: French Life and Art* (自己的世界：法国的生活与艺术) (2002). Strangely, I came across this book in a Chinese bookstore in Paris and just happened to open it on a page with a picture of Yang Jiechang and his children.

exhibits in Ru Xiaofan's or Yan Pei-Ming's careers at this time, except for a dual show with the two artists together, could be considered thematically Chinese or even focused on the artists' identity and difference to French culture. Rather, the artists were integrated into exhibitions dealing with aesthetic or thematic issues that did not distinguish the artists artistically, culturally, or politically as Chinese. Moreover, both artists had trained as painters, and their work during this period did not feature any images, material, or style that clearly indicated their Chinese identity. According to Ru Xiaofan in our interview, he was creating black and white abstract works inspired by the game of Chinese chess, and Yan Pei-Ming had produced a series of highly abstracted black and white portrait heads (*Têtes* or *Heads*) of ordinary people he had met in daily life in France (Marcadé 1989; Yan and Stech 2004:40). The fact that the artists did not overtly reference their Chinese cultural or political identity may indicate that they were discouraged in such efforts or did not see a value in emphasizing this at the time. As a Cultural Revolution propaganda artist, Yan Pei-Ming was painting images of Mao before he arrived in France and took this subject up again in 1987 (Yan and Stech 2004:4). He did not, however, publicly show the images until 1991 (Nuridsany 2003:48), after Chinese contemporary art was recognized in the artistic field.

Chen Zhen's artistic trajectory provides a contrast to these two other careers. Unlike Ru Xiaofan and Yan Pei-Ming, Chen Zhen completed all of his artistic training before he left China. While he was formally a student at the

Ecole des beaux-arts in Paris, this does not seem to have contributed extensively to his social capital since he did not participate in classes. Instead, as Xu Min told me, he spent his time studying French and visiting art museums. In 1987, just a year after his arrival, he participated in four exhibits, one of which was the *Salon des réalités nouvelles*. The other exhibits, however, were all Chinese-themed: *Six générations de peintres chinois à Paris* at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, an untitled exhibit at the Carrefour de la Chine in Paris, and a contemporary Chinese exhibit at the Galerie Schèmes in Lille, France. Chen's participation in these three exhibits indicates that there was some value placed on an identified Chinese art in the French market. Further research into the venues, however, reveals that each of these exhibitions was very peripheral to the contemporary field.⁹ Xu Min, who was not living in France at the time, indicated in our interview that Chen Zhen's contributions to these exhibits were likely his early abstract work and possibly some realist paintings that he had brought with him from China. He

⁹ The Maison des Sciences de l'Homme is a research institute in Paris, which likely provided space for a public exhibition. Carrefour de la Chine, as Wang Keping related to me in our interview, was a travel agency dedicated to travel in China, and the owner invited Chinese artists to exhibit in the office space. The exhibition in Lille was held in a small commercial gallery, and an Internet search indicates that it promotes a variety of styles and genres. While all of these places and exhibitions appear to have focused on art that was current or contemporary at the time, none of the venues specializes in contemporary international art as a genre. See <http://www.msh-paris.fr/en/> and www.galerieschemes.com.

had not yet developed the found-object sculptures and mixed media work that he would become known for after 1989 (Figure 6).¹⁰



Figure 6. Chen Zhen, *L'Oubli/Le Souvenir*, 1989. © Chen Zhen.
Paper, water, sand, glass, steel.

The fact that Chen Zhen, Yan Pei-Ming, and Ru Xiaofan were able to gain entry into the artistic field in France indicates that the field was competitive but not entirely closed to foreign artists. Studies such as Wuggenig (2002) and Wuggenig and Buchholz (2005) have indicated that artists from outside the Euro-American region have been under-represented in the artistic field, but these studies also show that such artists have always fared better when they have relocated to important Euro-American cultural

¹⁰ See a chronology of Chen Zhen's work on ADAC-L'Association des amis de Chen Zhen website at <http://www.chenzhen.org/francaise/category.php?id=1&PHPSESSID=088cb2de28713a338347028fd8fd68df>.

centres such as Paris and New York. In her studies of the French artistic field in the 1980s, Raymonde Moulin found that 20 percent of the artists living in Paris were foreigners.¹¹ This was much higher than in other professions, where the percentage was only 2 percent (1992:276). Foreigners also comprised 41 percent of the most highly recognized artists in the field (277). Moulin concludes that “being a foreigner is not an absolute handicap for an artistic career” (277).¹² Moulin, however, does not identify the foreign artists’ nationality or ethnic identity, or how cultural forms of difference might have contributed to a foreign artist’s success. This is interesting to note in the context of this study. For example, as Ulf Wuggenig and Larissa Buchholz’s studies demonstrate (2000; 2005), Asian artists, until very recently, have rarely made it to the highest level of the field. At the same time, Chinese, Indian, and Japanese artists have been coming to Paris to study and live since the early twentieth century (Andrews 1998; Birnie Danzker et al 2005; Zhu 2009). In the late 1920s, for example, Pang Xunqin studied in Paris, where he mastered the cubist painting style and participated in Parisian exhibitions. Despite his efforts to learn the art of modern Western

¹¹ Her research was based on two studies, one conducted between 1978 and 1980 and the other conducted from 1986 to 1988 (1992:276).

¹² From the French. My translation. “La proportion, parmi les artistes, des étrangers est très supérieure (20%) à celle des étrangers dans les autres professions supérieures (2%). Elle est semblable, au contraire, dans les professions les plus défavorisées socialement, encore que la répartition des nationalités y soit différente. Surtout, le fait d’être étranger n’est absolument pas un handicap dans une carrière artistique : la proportion d’artistes d’origine étrangère est deux fois plus élevée (41%) dans les groupe des artistes ayant la plus forte visibilité que dans celui où cette visibilité est la plus faible” (Moulin 1992:276-277).

painting, Pang recalled in his memoir that a well-known French critic dismissed his work and suggested that he should learn more about the art of his own country (Zhu 2009:40-41). Such examples of exclusion and Othering of Asian artists were not unique, and may indicate a major challenge an Asian artist faced when competing in the French or Euro-American artistic field in the early part of the twentieth century. Not only were they hampered by their artistic heritage and the stereotypes common in the Western imaginary, they were also challenged by language and cultural difference. Famous “foreign” artists who succeeded in France – Picasso, Brancusi, and Van Gogh – may have spoken a different language, but they all came from European countries where they share a common artistic heritage. Under the modern aesthetic regime that dominated the early part of the twentieth century, artists were expected to master a certain formal aesthetic that was then judged by Western aesthetic taste. To succeed in such a field, artists had to master and assimilate a certain, prescribed cultural aesthetic. Language and cultural differences would be a distinct disadvantage for a Chinese artist, just as they would be for a European trying to master the nuances of traditional Chinese painting.

A changing aesthetic sensibility in Western art may have contributed to making the artistic field more receptive to Asian artists after the 1950s. The development of abstract styles, such as Tachisme in France and Abstract Expressionism in America, introduced a new appreciation for certain Asian references in modern Western painting. American artist Mark Tobey, for

example, studied Chinese ink painting and calligraphy in China and incorporated calligraphic lines in his abstract painting. An appreciation for this type of Asian-Western crossover in France is demonstrated by the mix of Chinese exhibits that Chen Zhen participated in, and the fact that the artists, upon arrival, were able to sell their skills in Chinese ink painting and calligraphy.¹³ The French appreciation for a Chinese aesthetic is also indicated by the fact that Galerie Jeanne Bucher represents Mark Tobey's work in Paris. As Yang Jiechang related in our interview, it was only after his arrival in France that he realized the Asian influence on modern Western painting and, a little later, recognized that his invitation to exhibit with Jeanne Bucher was derived, in part, from the fact that they also represent Tobey. The affinity between his work and Tobey's is still emphasized by the gallery today. In the Fall of 2010, during my research period in Paris, I visited FIAC, the annual contemporary art fair, where the booth hosted by Galerie Jeanne Bucher featured a special homage to Mark Tobey, with works by both Tobey and Yang Jiechang.

One Chinese artist who successfully entered the modernist artistic field in France prior to the 1980s, perhaps because of the French affinity for Chinese aesthetics, is Zao Wou-Ki (1920-2013). He was a graduate of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou and arrived in France in 1948. In Paris, he joined the Montparnasse artistic scene and mastered an abstract painting style that was recognized for its affinity with the French Tachist movement,

¹³ In our interview, for example, Ru Xiaofan explained that he was given a place to live in Paris in exchange for calligraphy and painting lessons.

which included such artists as Pierre Soulages, Hans Hartung, and Jean-Paul Riopelle (Frèches 2007:30-31). He occasionally integrated some Chinese features in his work, such as calligraphic characters or the use of ink but, for the most part, Zao appears to have striven to naturalize into French culture and to represent himself as a French rather than a Chinese artist (Frèches 2007). This integrative attitude was emphasized by an encounter between Yang Jiechang and Zao Wou-Ki. Meeting him soon after his arrival in France in 1989, Yang related in our interview how Zao advised him that “there are two things you have to know in France: one, study good French and, second, don’t keep contact with other Chinese.” Yang understood this to mean that success would be contingent on cultural and artistic assimilation rather than on identity differentiation. Zao’s advice, then, reflects the historical specificities of the artistic field in the 1950s, when the modern formalist aesthetic was dominant.¹⁴ To succeed an artist had to meet, and even exceed, the expectations of the field through his art rather than through his identity. This appears to be the same situation for the Chinese artists who arrived in France before 1989, before there was a significant value placed on the cultural or political difference of a Chinese artist. Like Zao, Chen Zhen, Yan

¹⁴ In his 2007 book on Zao Wou-Ki, José Frèches describes Zao’s experience fitting into the Montparnasse art scene: gallery owner Pierre Loeb initially did not want to see his work, convinced that Chinese artists produced an “excessively conventional and connotative style” (38). Loeb would eventually be captivated by Zao’s “unclassifiable style” (38). Zao also had to gain confidence with his artistic peers in Paris, where Picasso called him “the little Chinaman” (38). Frèches describes how a young Zao became close to artists like Dubuffet and Michaux, “listened and watched,” and was always “so anxious to find his place, having sworn he wouldn’t be ‘just another Chinaman’” (39).

Pei-Ming, and Ru Xiaofan were each challenged to fit into the French cultural context and develop an artistic practice that would be distinguished for its singular artistic rather than political and/or cultural difference. The French education of Yan Pei-Ming and Ru Xiaofan provided them with training in the aesthetic requirements of the field (cultural capital) and gave them the necessary social capital to enter the field as emerging French artists rather than as Chinese artists. As Yan Pei-Ming explained in an interview in 2007, “I completed my studies in France and I have been impregnated with the artistic culture of the West” (Gaudriault 2007:33).¹⁵ It is perhaps for this reason that Yan Pei-Ming never “dared” to show his Mao portraits until 1991 (Nuridsany 2003:48). Chen Zhen, in the meantime, coming from China and without the benefit of a French education or a strong network in the art world, had to rely on amateur and lower-tier exhibition venues in his first few years in France.

Wang Keping, who arrived before 1989, also appears to have found recognition on the basis of his aesthetic approach rather than his Chinese identity. As explained in Chapter Two, Wang had produced some of the most politically charged artworks in China, and was involved with the democracy movement of the late 1970s. After he arrived in France, however, he appears to have eschewed political themes and focused on producing modern, semi-

¹⁵ From the French. My translation. “J’ai suivi mes études en France, je me suis imprégné de la culture artistique occidentale” (Gaudriault 2007:33).

abstract wood sculptures similar to the work of twentieth century modernist sculptors like Constantin Brancusi and Hans Arp (Figure 7).¹⁶ With an



Figure 7. Wang Keping, *Untitled*, 1996,
© Wang Keping.

emphasis on aesthetic form, his work no longer resembled anything that could be construed as politically dissident or even specifically Chinese. Galerie Zurcher, the gallery that has represented him for most of his career, appears to favour artists, particularly sculptors, working in a late modernist idiom. Wang is their only Chinese artist and, while his Chinese identity and his role with the Stars are acknowledged, Wang's political and cultural

¹⁶ The one exception that I am aware of where Wang has used his art for a political statement after he arrived in France is his participation in a Tiananmen Square commemorative exhibit, *Tian'anmen 4 juin-4 décembre: Je n'oublie pas*, presented in Paris in 1989. See Chapter Five.

differences play no part in the discourse that has been used to validate the originality of his work since he moved to France.¹⁷

After 1989, there is a clear shift in the career trajectories of all of the artists, whether they arrived in 1989, like Huang Yong Ping and Yang Jiechang, or before 1989. This shift suggests that the artists who arrived earlier were benefiting from the events of 1989 and the new values that were being placed on Chinese art and artists. This change is marked not by an increase in French exhibits as much as by international exhibitions. From 1990 to 1993, there were at least seven Chinese-themed contemporary art exhibits presented outside of China and without Chinese sponsorship.¹⁸ In this time period, an unprecedented number of Chinese artists were also featured at the large contemporary art events, the Venice Biennale and Documenta. As I discuss in the next chapter, these international group exhibits are important for establishing the significance of Chinese

¹⁷ <http://www.galeriezurcher.com/about-us/>. A catalogue published in 2008 begins with a biographical essay by Wang where he describes his activities with Stars. The catalogue includes images of his early work. The overall emphasis, however, is on Wang's abstract pieces and career as it has evolved in France.

¹⁸ Here I include *Art Chinois 1990: Chine demain pour hier*, Pourrières, France (1990), *I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne*, Pasadena, California (1991), and *China's New Art after 1989*, Hong Kong, *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture*, Berlin, *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-garde in Exile*, Milwaukee, *Silent Energy: New Art from China*, Oxford, England, and *Mao Goes Pop*, Sydney, Australia, all in 1993. For a more extensive list of post-1979 Chinese art exhibits around the globe, see Franziska Koch's on-line exhibit mapping project www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/research/heidelberg-research-architecture/hra-portal/detail/m/franziska-koch-projekt-exhibition-map.html.

contemporary art and its dissident value internationally. Huang Yong Ping was included in five of these exhibits, Yang Jiechang in three, and Yan Pei-Ming and Chen Zhen in two.

The artists' access to these large international exhibits, as well as other solo and group shows in increasingly significant venues, was aided by a social network that included an ever-increasing presence of important curators. Three types of curators are included in this network, each making a different contribution to the artists' careers. First, the artists were aided by a number of established international curators, such as Jean-Hubert Martin (France), Pontus Hultén (Sweden, France), Achille Bonita Oliva (Italy), and Harald Szeemann (Switzerland). These curators had access to the very top exhibition venues and their introduction and endorsement of any artist, at the time, provided an almost instant recognition in the artistic field.

Second, a number of new and emerging curators supported the artists. These curators were part of a 1990s growth in what has been called independent curators (Thea 2001; Brenson [1998] 2005). Independent curators are often not attached to any one institution, at least not for long, and build their reputation on freelance exhibitions. The increase of international biennials in the 1990s provided prime opportunities for these curators to develop their careers (Brenson 2005; Sejdel 2009). Initially, independent curators are less powerful than the established curators and, like new artists, their careers depend on building a strong social network of their own. Their success also depends on their ability to strategically select

and promote the right artists, in the right places, at the right time. The career trajectories of the artists in this study have converged with the rising careers of some of the now highly recognized and influential independent curators, such as Hans Ulrich-Obrist, Jérôme Sans, Jeffrey Deitch, Adelina von Fürstenberg, Fei Dawei, Hou Hanru, and Gao Minglu.

The latter three curators in this group form a third category, the "authentic Chinese curator." As the art world began to welcome artists from outside of the West in the 1990s, it had to address the post-colonial criticism of Western cultural appropriation and the realization, as Thomas McEvilley points out, "that one's culture is not a standard by which all others are to be measured" (1992:67). This meant that after 1989, there was a growing demand for native experts who could confirm the authenticity of artists from diverse cultures and interpret their work (Brenson 2006; Fisher [1996] 2005). As immigrants to France, Fei Dawei and Hou Hanru have played an instrumental role in the promotion of Chinese artists, especially six of the artists in this study: Huang Yong Ping, Chen Zhen, Wang Du, Yan Pei-Ming, Yang Jiechang, and Shen Yuan. Fei Dawei served as the Chinese consultant for the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibit and also accepted asylum after the Tiananmen Square incident. After 1989, Fei immediately began to develop a career as an expert on Chinese contemporary art, curating exhibits in France and abroad. His first professional exhibit, which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, is now considered the first Chinese-themed contemporary exhibit after 1989. *Art Chinois 1990: Chine demain pour hier* was presented in

Pourrières, France in the summer of 1990 and featured the work of Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, Chen Zhen, Yan Pei-Ming, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Gu Wenda (Fei Dawei 1990). Following this debut, Fei was invited to curate exhibits in Japan (1991) and at the 1995 Venice Biennale. By 2002, he was appointed Director of the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing, from where he continued to feature the artists in this study in exhibits in China and internationally.

Hou Hanru has made an even greater impact on the artists in this study. Hou Hanru came to France in 1990 in response to Fei's invitation to assist with *Chine demain pour hier*, and he took this opportunity to stay on in France. Like Fei, Hou was a graduate of the Central Academy of Art in Beijing. As he told me in our 2010 interview, he majored in Western medieval art. After arriving in France, Hou, like Fei, also found himself in demand as a curator and expert on Chinese contemporary art. Unlike Fei, Hou took steps early on to diversify his curatorial career so he was not only focusing on Chinese specific exhibits. In our interview, Hou relates how in 1991-92 he attended a nine-month curatorial program in Prato, Italy, that gave him an intensive lesson in curatorial and contemporary art practice in the West. As part of this program, he travelled Europe, visiting museums and making many valuable contacts in the field. These connections became the source of his early work as an independent writer and curator. For example, David Elliott, the curator of Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, invited Hou to write a catalogue essay for *Silent Energy: New Art from China*. As Hou related

to me, this was his first paid job outside of China. Elliott included work by Chen Zhen, Huang Yong Ping, and Yang Jiechang in the show, which suggests that Hou may also have advised Elliott on the selection of artists. As Hou related to me, his first paid curatorial project was a result of his Prato experience. His roommate in Prato was a curator from the Taidemuseo in Pori, Finland, and this relationship resulted in the 1994 exhibit of Chinese contemporary art, *Out of the Centre*, featuring the work of Chen Zhen, Yang Jiechang, Yan Pei-Ming, and Huang Yong Ping.

After his initial work on Chinese-themed shows, Hou took on a new theme, that of the immigrant artist living and working in the West. In 1997, Hou Hanru presented *Les Parisien(ne)s* in London at the Institute of International Visual Arts (InIVA) and Camden Arts Centre (Hou 1997). The show featured the work of immigrant artists living and working in Paris including Shen Yuan, Wang Du, and Chen Zhen. In 1997, Hou co-curated the multi-city exhibition *Cities on the Move* with Hans Ulrich-Obrist, which further strengthened his international reputation as a contemporary art curator.¹⁹ Hou's increased social capital as a curator, then, worked

¹⁹ Shen Yuan, Chen Zhen, Huang Yong Ping, and Wang Du were included in *Cities on the Move*. Sometime before 1997, Hou Hanru met Hans-Ulrich Obrist. Obrist was introduced to the Chinese artists living in Paris when he was given a room next door to Huang Yong Ping at the Fondation Cartier (Tinari and Baecker 2009:13). Obrist, like Hou Hanru, was just beginning his curatorial career, but in 1993, at age 25, he was already the curator of contemporary art at the Musée de l'art moderne de la ville de Paris) and he was recognized internationally for his unconventional exhibition approach. Commissioned by the Vienna Secession, he invited Hou Hanru to work with him in producing *Cities on the Move*, an exhibit designed to address the development of art and architecture in Asian cities.

reciprocally to benefit the Chinese artists in this study; as his career developed and improved, so too did the artists’.

Strong curatorial connections, especially ones with curators like Hou Hanru, who often included the artists in non-Chinese themed exhibits, greatly enhanced the artists’ access to prestigious exhibition venues around the world. The positive results of this exposure are indicated by the artists’ strong ratings on the art database ArtFacts.net. ArtFacts.net, like the German site KunstKompass,²⁰ rates artists on exhibition records, auction sales and prices, and publications in the contemporary art field.²¹ Huang Yong Ping, Chen Zhen, Yan Pei-Ming, and Wang Du have all received high rankings on ArtFacts.net, placing them among the top 1,000 artists in the international field. Based on data collected since 1996, the 2011 rating for Huang Yong Ping was 530 (with 1 representing the highest rating), while Yan Pei-Ming was at 625, Chen Zhen at 628, and Wang Du at 830. The others fall further behind, with Yang Jiechang at 2650, Shen Yuan at 2996, Wang Keping at 7976, and Du Zhenjun at approximately 15000 (Appendix IV).²² While their ratings differ, the very fact that an artist appears on the database signifies that the artist has been vetted and presented at significant artistic venues.

²⁰ KunstKompass was initiated by the German magazine *Capital* and began charting artistic careers in 1970. Every year they produce a list of the top 100 artists of the year. Since 2008, the database has been published by *Manager Magazin*.

²¹ ArtFacts.net:

http://www.artfacts.net/marketing_new/?Services.Artist.Ranking.

²² The databases continue to rate the artists. I was completing my documentary research in 2011 and used this year as a cutoff point for analyzing the data on the artists’ career progression from the date of their arrival in France.

Databases such as ArtFacts.net, however, do not take into account differences in artistic production and how this has affected an artist's rating. A consideration of the artists' individual production in relation to their ratings is then helpful for understanding how the type of work an artist produces affects the artist's overall value in the field.

In Chapter One, I outlined how contemporary artists are recognized and valued for their singularity – that is, how an artist's work (or identity) is recognized as a transgressive challenge to an artistic, social, or political convention. In the previous chapter, I outlined how *Magiciens de la Terre* curator Jean-Hubert Martin justified his selection of Chinese artists. The artists' transgressive difference in relation to Western artists was found in how their work combined recognized Chinese features with contemporary art practices, and how this work was distinguished from the expected conventions of official art in China. In other words, Martin recognized and valued how the artists transgressed Western artistic practices and, at the same time, how their work challenged Chinese political policy. Such artistic and politically dissident gestures, as Heinich has demonstrated in her studies, are further strengthened when an artwork activates a public controversy (1997a). In this study, I found that the artists who work within the contemporary idiom – installation work, sculpture, or painting with a strong conceptual underpinning – and clearly indicate their Chinese identity in some way rank higher on *ArtFacts.net* than artists who work in a modernist abstract genre and/or do not indicate their Chinese identity. The

highest-ranked artist in this study, Huang Yong Ping, is also the only artist in this study to have created work that has instigated a public controversy. The different ratings between artists are then best illustrated through a comparison of artistic trajectories in relation to the work that they have produced.

The highest ranked artist, Huang Yong Ping, was recognized and introduced by Jean-Hubert Martin, who invited him to participate in *Les Magiciens de la Terre*. As I explained in the previous chapter, Martin was especially taken with Huang's unique combination of European Dada and Taoism and how this set his work apart from the "official" art practices in China. After *Magiciens*, Huang Yong Ping's career steadily improved as he was featured in increasingly significant international exhibitions and museums.²³ In the course of his career, Huang Yong Ping never changed his artistic strategy but continued to produce mixed-media work, although increasingly on a larger scale.²⁴ His work continues to make clear references to Dada precedents in their conceptual approach and distinctly Chinese themes in how they used Chinese objects, images, words, and ideas. Of all the artists in this study, Huang Yong Ping has also been the most controversial

²³ From my documentary research and the interviews completed for this study, Jean-Hubert Martin appears to have played a significant role in assisting Huang in his initial years in France. Martin included Huang in exhibits in France and internationally and helped him to find studio space/accommodation when he arrived.

²⁴ Both Huang Yong Ping and his wife, Shen Yuan, commented in our interviews for this study on how their move to France provided a greater availability of materials to work with and the opportunity to work on a much larger scale.

and transgressive, not for any specific dissident statements about China, but for how his work has challenged moral and political values in the West. For example, *Theatre of the World* (1993), the tortoise-shaped terrarium with various insects and reptiles inside (Chapter Two, Figure 2), provoked a reaction from animal rights activists each time it was presented in European and North American exhibitions (Vergne and Chong 2005:34-36). In almost every location, the work was emptied of its live contents after the protests. Another work, *Bat Project* (2001-2005), touched on the sensitive relationship between China, the United States, and France and, as such, it is Huang's most overtly political work. Inspired by the crash landing of the American EP-3 spy plane on Hainan Island in 2001, Huang constructed a full-scale replica plane in three separate parts (an allusion to how the plane was dismantled by the Chinese government and returned to the USA in pieces in another plane) for a sculpture exhibit in Shenzhen. Before the exhibit could open, the French and American governments expressed concern about the diplomatic implications of the work. In order to avoid a situation, Chinese authorities removed Huang's project from the exhibit. Huang attempted to resurrect the project at two later exhibits, in Guangzhou in 2002 and in Beijing in 2003 (Vergne and Chong 2005:60-79). Again, both projects were canceled before the show opened. Huang recreated and finally exhibited the work in 2004 in the United States, where it was included in his retrospective exhibit, *House of Oracles*, produced by the Walker Centre in Minneapolis.²⁵ *Bat Project* and

²⁵ *Bat Project* and *Theatre of the World* were included in *House of Oracles* as it

Theatre of the World generated considerable controversy – the latter for challenging social and moral values and the former for challenging political values. With the one project closed down by popular reaction in the West and the other by government agents in China, these two works successfully meet the transgressive requirement of the contemporary art field – a success that appears to be reflected in Huang’s high ArtFacts.net rating.

Despite a strong start at *Magiciens de la Terre*, Yang Jiechang’s career does not follow the same trajectory as Huang’s. There may be two reasons for this. First, Yang’s initial success was with large-scale ink paintings like the one shown in Figure 5 (Chapter Three), which appealed to a late-modernist fraction of the field in France as discussed above. Second, over the years Yang has often changed his approach by trying different media and introducing sculptural and installation components to his work. These latter experiments, more conceptual and less formally aesthetic, may not have appealed to the modernist fraction that has supported his ink work. Ink painting, as Hou Hanru has pointed out, has been the only consistent thread in Yang’s oeuvre, and it is difficult to relate to his conceptual/installation pieces (2008). As Jean-Hubert Martin noted in our interview,

In general, you had the feeling that the Cultural Revolution had really erased everything and killed everything and that there was no past [in China]. With him [Yang], I had the feeling that he still had a sense of history and that he was trying to rebuild something in his work from the past. I saw some very deep paintings in his studio at that time. Unfortunately, I asked him to do something similar in *Magiciens de la Terre* but he changed, he is a strange character because he has changed.

was presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2007.

Yang's inconsistency poses a problem for how to categorize him as an artist. As Heinich demonstrated in her study of how art-world agents confirm the value of an artist (2014), transgressive gestures are expected and encouraged, but the agents also look for consistency in an artist's oeuvre and in how the work relates, in a consistent manner, to art-historical precedents. With his strength and consistency in ink painting and with no notable artistic controversies, Yang's rating then falls behind Huang and the other artists in this study.

Arriving in 1990, a year later than Huang Yong Ping and Yang Jiechang, Wang Du's career path indicates how a strategic artistic change can work positively for enhancing a career. Wang took several years to develop his work after his arrival in France. In China he had studied sculpture, made paintings, and put on performance works. It was not until 1994 that he began to present the work that would define his career: large-scale poly-resin figurative sculptures and interactive mixed-media works that focus on the representation of world events and people by the public media. By 1999 he was recognized in Europe and had had several solo exhibits in private galleries. His most important break came when he was included, along with 19 other Chinese artists, in the *Aperto* exhibit at the 1999 Venice Biennale. At the Biennale he showed *Marché aux puces (Flea market)*, which featured poly-resin bust portraits of different world figures such as George Bush, Yasser Arafat, and Monica Lewinsky, all arranged on a long raised plinth. These figures range in scale and often appear distorted by their

transformation from 2D images into 3D forms. Like his other work up to this date, *Marché aux puces* did not address any discernible Chinese subject. Then in 2000, as related in the Introduction, Wang produced his first Chinese-themed piece, *Défilé (Parade)*, for Deitch Projects in New York. The tableau of Chinese military figures, a rocket, airplane, and protesters played off American familiarity with Cold War propaganda, the ongoing political tension over Taiwan, and the recent media coverage of the 1999 American bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. The Deitch Project press release describes the work as “a frightening, but simultaneously comic version of Chinese military power” (Deitch Project 2000). Still, *Défilé* was not controversial in the sense that it shocked or stirred a public or government response like Huang’s pieces. Rather, it was the work in conjunction with the way it was mediated that has contributed to Wang Du’s recognition as a Chinese dissident. The press release for the Deitch Project exhibit introduced Wang Du as a Chinese rather than a French artist and, without actually using the words, described him as a dissident and an exile.²⁶ The writer claimed that Wang Du was “already acclaimed” in China for his work as a figurative sculptor and that he

used his reputation to challenge the authorities with provocative work. He was sent to prison and was only released through the intervention of the French government. He subsequently received political asylum in France, where he currently resides (Deitch Projects 2000).

²⁶ In our interview, Wang Du says that he became a French citizen two years after his arrival.

As explained in Chapter Two, Wang Du's artwork produced in China was never politically provocative except as a challenge to the regulated conventions of the field. Rather, it was his organization of a lecture series in 1986-87 that gained a negative reaction from officials. His arrest, as he explained to me in our interview, came two years after he discontinued the lectures and was a result of speaking at a demonstration in Guangzhou in 1989 in support of the Tiananmen Square protests. By eliding the facts with Wang Du's production of a Chinese-themed work, the press release establishes Wang Du as a Chinese dissident and exile, an identity that was then reinforced in the reviews of his show.²⁷ After 2000, *Défilé* became the defining work of Wang Du's oeuvre, appearing as the key piece in his 2004-05 retrospective and as an exemplary work in French and Chinese art history texts.²⁸ After *Défilé*, Wang did not produce any other work that directly addressed Chinese politics, and he insisted in our interview that he is neither a dissident nor an exile. Still, his career improved markedly after 1999-2000, which suggests that creating a Chinese-themed work might have contributed to a significant shift in the value of his work. As I demonstrated in the previous chapters and in my analysis of curatorial discourses in relation to Chen Zhen below, the attribution of political dissidence is validated not only through the artist's production but, more significantly, in the mediating

²⁷ See, for example, Deitch Press Release, Holland Cotter, "Art in Review; Wang Du" *New York Times* (December 22, 2000) and Stefano Pasquini, "Wang Du," *NY Arts Magazine* (2000).

²⁸ See, for example, Erickson (2005) and Millet (2006), where *Défilé* is the one illustration of Wang Du's work.

discourses that recognize the artist's Chinese identity in relation to the Western imaginary of the Chinese dissident.

Yan Pei-Ming also made a strategic change in his work after 1989, one that would bring him recognition as a Chinese dissident artist. By 1988, Yan Pei-Ming was beginning to develop a respectable career as a French painter with his abstract black-and-white portraits (Marcadé 1988). Yan exhibited these works in numerous provincial group and solo shows. In 1991, two years after the Tiananmen Square incident, he was given his first solo show in Paris, at the Anne de Villepoix gallery. The exhibit, *Face à Face, à partir de son histoire mon histoire commence* (*Face to Face, from his story my story begins*), presented his Mao portraits for the first time (Figure 8). The title of



Figure 8. Yan Pei-Ming, *Mao*, 1991.
© Yan Pei-Ming/SODRAC (2015).

the exhibit and the images of Mao suggest that Yan's artistic origins are rooted in China. Yan Pei-Ming appears to have been well aware of the strategic advantage of showing images of Mao after 1989. As he admitted in an interview with art critic Michel Nuridsany, "back then, I wanted to make a splash. I was a complete unknown in Paris. The portraits of Mao gave people an idea of who they were dealing with" (Nuridsany 2003:48). Nuridsany claims that the exhibit in Paris was Yan Pei-Ming's "real debut" (2003:48) and that the visitors to the show either "liked" or "loathed" the work, a response that provided the right sort of art world controversy to give added value to Yan Pei-Ming's work. This value was then further affirmed when the work in the show was purchased by Jean Brolly, an important French collector (Nuridsany 2004:48).

In contrast to the most highly rated artists in this study, the career trajectories and lower ratings of Wang Keping and Ru Xiaofan demonstrate how an artist's production may inhibit their entry into the dominant fraction of the field. With no reference to China and too modernist in a formal sense, Wang Keping's sculptural work has never broken into the highest contemporary fraction. Wang Keping even recognizes this fact. When he was approached to participate in this study, he insisted he was not the same as the other participating Chinese artists.

Ru Xiaofan has continued to paint but eventually switched from an abstract style to painting realistic, playful, colourful images that do not

present obvious Chinese themes – ancient, contemporary, or dissenting (Figure 9). If he does represent a Chinese theme at all, as in the case of his



Figure 9. Ru Xiaofan, *Bubblegame No. 4*, 2003. © Ru Xiaofan.

paintings inspired by Chinese chess or a series of flower images entitled *Hundred Flowers* (2001),²⁹ the allusion to China is not immediately obvious to a Western audience. His chosen medium, painting in a traditional easel format, also places him in a difficult category, one that Yan Pei-Ming managed to overcome by increasing the scale of his work and changing his subject.

²⁹ *Hundred Flowers* is a series of paintings each with a single flower head on a plain background. The works are exhibited in a grid across the wall. The title refers to Mao's 1957 One Hundred Flowers Movement, where he exhorted the masses to express themselves and openly criticize the Party – thus “let one hundred flowers bloom and one hundred schools of thought contend.” While the campaign was initially viewed as an encouraging sign of liberalization after the Revolution, it ended with the imprisonment and persecution of many intellectuals and declared Rightists (Spence 1990:569-73).

While Ru Xiaofan has developed a successful artistic career, his lack of representation on ArtFacts.net indicates that by 2011 he had not yet exhibited in an appropriate contemporary venue or had work sold through a recognized auction agency. This has left him far behind the other artists in this form of rating.

Shen Yuan and Du Zhenjun present anomalies in this study of artistic trajectories, and also indicate the limits of database ratings. Du Zhenjun is the lowest-ranked artist, which may be attributed to the fact that his work is difficult for the databases to categorize. After arriving in France, as he explained to me in our interview, he enrolled in graduate school and studied in France's first digital media program. Du produces interactive digital media work that requires specialized equipment and spaces; spaces that are not always documented by the databases. Moreover, such work is difficult to market, so it does not end up in galleries or auctions. Recently Du has begun to make large-format digital photos that are marketable and shown in traditional galleries.³⁰ As a result, Du now appears, belatedly, on the arts databases.

Aided by her relationship to Huang Yong Ping, Shen Yuan immigrated to France in 1990. As with so many female artists, Shen Yuan's career was initially sidelined by family priorities. During her first few years in France, while Huang Yong Ping developed his career, she worked to help support the family. Shen Yuan gained her first important exhibit in 1994 after a German

³⁰ See examples of Du Zhenjun's work on his website at <http://duzhenjun.com>.

curator came to visit Huang Yong Ping. The curator saw a photo of a small solo show that Shen Yuan had produced herself, *Perdre sa salive* (1994) (Figure 10), and offered to include her work in an exhibit in Germany. After



Figure 10. Shen Yuan, *Perdre sa salive*, 1994.
© Shen Yuan/SODRAC (2015).

arriving in France, Shen Yuan continued to explore mixed media sculptural and installation works, an approach she had begun in China and represented by her piece in *China/Avant-Garde* in 1989. Her work often incorporates handmade objects in conjunction with common, mass-produced or found objects. Her most constant theme has been the “shock” and “utter shift” she felt upon immigrating into a foreign culture and language (Shen and Sans 2010:079). She occasionally uses Chinese objects or images – cotton shoes, porcelain, goldfish – but generally avoids obvious controversial references to Chinese and Western political issues.³¹ The most transgressive differences in

³¹ Shen Yuan has produced a few works that address environmental and social issues related to China, such as the Three Gorges Dam project (*Le*

her work are inspired by her sense of cultural alterity as an immigrant in Western society. Yet, even as she has emphasized to me and others that her primary theme is about the migrant experience (Sans and Guo Xiaoyan 2010), critics and writers continue to refer to her move to France as an “exile,” which suggests a political motivation for her immigration and her work.³² Shen Yuan’s rating on the database then has been highly inconsistent, which may reflect the response to her chosen theme or even her gender, something that the databases do not take into account. As Raymonde Moulin found in her study of the artistic field, “there is no discrimination against entering an artistic career, but the chances of success at a high level are often weaker for women than for men” (1992:279).³³ Shen is the only female in this study and one of the few recognized female artists of the ’85 Movement generation. Even in the Western field, few female artists have achieved the mythic stature of their male counterparts, which suggests that male identity may carry an unrecognized value in the artistic field. This a subject that needs further research.

Ventre de pierre, 2008), pollution (*Errance immortelle*, 2008), or the clearance of historic districts in many cities in China (*Flying Bowl*, 2002) (Sans and Guo 2010). Since the early 2000s, other Chinese artists have addressed these sorts of subjects without incurring significant reaction from government officials.

³² See, for example, French art historian Soko Phay-Vakalis’ essay on Shen Yuan, where she recognizes Shen’s “alien” Otherness and claims Shen “knows the suddenness and brutality with which exile befalls a person, bearing witness to her attachments to her roots, which were forever shaken” (2010: 091).

³³ From the French. My translation. “Il n’existe pas, pour les femmes, de discrimination à l’entrée dans la carrière artistique, mais les chances de réussite à un niveau élevé sont beaucoup plus faibles pour elles que pour les hommes” (Moulin 1992:279).

Of all the artists in this study, Chen Zhen's career underwent the greatest transformation, and as such provides an exemplary study of how an artist's production, the demands of the artistic field, relationships with curators, and the mediation of art world discourses "make" (Heinich 2000) an artist. Furthermore, Chen Zhen, unlike Ai Weiwei, never produced work that was critical of China or its policies, yet, like most of the artists in this study, the value of his work has been constructed in relation to his identity as a Chinese national and what that signifies in a social space dominated by Western tastes and values. Chen Zhen's career, then, also exemplifies how the value of political and artistic dissidence is shaped not only by the artist's art and actions, but also by the agents in the field who recognize and value dissidence as an artistic expression in relation to identified Chinese artists.

Chen Zhen came from China trained as a painter adept at producing realist images.³⁴ His most daring or avant-garde works at the time were abstract paintings. After spending three years in France, he must have realized that both realist and abstract painting were no longer in the avant-garde. Thus, by 1989, Chen Zhen moved from painting to constructing objects that combined found materials, images, text, welded metal, and natural elements such as water, sand, ash, and wood. In their use of refuse, found objects, and vitrines, these works have a strong visual and conceptual affinity with the work of Arman and the French Nouveaux Réalistes (New

³⁴ Chen Zhen studied at the Theatre Institute of Shanghai, where his principal discipline was set design, but he also studied oil painting. Prior to going to France he was a professor at the same institution.

Realists) of the 1960s and with the work of more contemporary artists such as Reinhard Mucha and Gilberto Zorio.³⁵ It is likely that Chen Zhen, who had been looking at art since his arrival in Paris in 1986, would have seen works by these artists. For example, in addition to its permanent collection, which contains work by the Nouveaux Réalistes, the Pompidou Centre hosted exhibits of Mucha's and Zorio's work from September to December 1986 and a large Yves Tinguely retrospective from November 1988 to March 1989.³⁶

Chen Zhen's new work was featured in his first solo exhibition in February 1989, just before the events in Tiananmen Square.³⁷ According to Xu Min in the interview for this study, none of his works sold at this show. It is possible, however, that Chen Zhen made the acquaintance of Jérôme Sans at this exhibit.³⁸ The very next year, in March 1990, Sans teamed up with

³⁵ Chen Zhen's work has a strong resemblance to the graphic and structural presentation of Mucha's work. Both artists have used vitrines, steel, wood, tables, chairs, found objects, text, and graphic images within metal frames as a significant part of their oeuvre. Mucha began producing his work in the early 1980s. There is also much affinity between Chen Zhen's interest in using water and natural elements with the work of Italian artist Zorio (b. 1944), who was member of the Italian Arte Povera movement. Zorio is noted for his use of natural and eclectic materials and his interest in transformative alchemical processes. The similarities warrant further research and, as far as I am aware, curators who have presented Chen's work have not noted these similarities. See <http://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/reinhard-mucha> and <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artists/bios/865>.

³⁶ Pontus Hultén curated the Tinguely retrospective. See Chen Zhen's connection to Hultén below.

³⁷ In our interview, Xu Min explained that the exhibit was organized by a French couple who owned an art-leasing company. Xu Min was still in China at this time and does not know the couple or how Chen Zhen made their acquaintance.

³⁸ Throughout my research period, I made attempts to interview Jérôme Sans, offering to meet with him in Paris and then in Beijing, but I never

Pontus Hultén and Bernard Huin and organized another solo show for Chen Zhen at Hangar 028, a Paris exhibition space managed by the Musée départemental des Vosges (Hultén, Sans, and Huin 1990). While not the most prestigious venue in Paris, it was a credible and significant site for a first solo show by an unknown artist.

This second exhibit is significant for establishing Chen Zhen's new career. Here, Chen Zhen was finally introduced to an important social network in the artistic field. As the former and founding director of the Pompidou Centre, Pontus Hultén's name and involvement with the exhibit assured Chen Zhen a strong endorsement in the same way the association with Jean-Hubert Martin aided Huang Yong Ping and Yang Jiechang. Bernard Huin, director of the Musée départemental des Vosges, provided further confirmation of the artist's significance. Jérôme Sans, on the other hand, was a young curator with much less social capital. He was a recent graduate of ICART (Institut supérieur des Carrières Artistiques) in Paris and has since developed a high profile career as an independent curator. Teaming up with Hultén and Huin would not only help Chen Zhen, but also bolster Sans' career.³⁹

received a reply. I made queries by e-mail and in person at the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing in 2011, where Sans was director. Information on Sans is extremely scarce, and I have had to piece together the possible relationship between the artist and curator primarily through documentary sources.

³⁹ See http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jérôme_Sans and ICART's site, <http://www.icart.fr/index.php/langues>. ICART claims to be the "first school of art business in France" and Sans and Nicolas Bourriaud are listed as important alumni. In 2000, Sans was appointed, along with Nicolas

After the 1990 exhibit, Chen Zhen's social capital continued to improve. In 1991, Chen Zhen was introduced, through Jérôme Sans, to Adelina von Fürstenberg, a very well connected international curator who would also be a lifelong supporter of his work (von Fürstenberg 2003:288). Von Fürstenberg arranged exhibition opportunities for Chen Zhen and then included him in *Trésors du Voyage* at the 1993 Venice Biennale.⁴⁰ It is likely through this connection that Chen Zhen was introduced to Achille Bonito Oliva and Jeffrey Deitch. Bonito Oliva, an important Italian curator, was the chief curator of the 1993 Biennale, and American Jeffrey Deitch had worked with von Fürstenberg at the Deste Foundation before setting up his influential art gallery in New York in 1996. In 1996 and 2000, Deitch invited Chen Zhen to New York to produce and exhibit installation projects.⁴¹ It was through this chain of international connections that, in a matter of a few short years, from 1989 to 1996, Chen Zhen went from being an unknown

Bourriaud, to direct the newly founded contemporary art space, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. From 2008 to 2011, Sans was the director of the Ullens Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art in Beijing.

⁴⁰ Von Fürstenberg included Chen Zhen in a group exhibit she organized in Paris in 1991 and then, in 1992, invited Chen Zhen to exhibit and take up a three-month residency at Le Consortium in Grenoble, where she was the newly-appointed director (Rosenberg and Xu 2003).

⁴¹ *Daily Incantations: An Installation by Chen Zhen* was exhibited in New York from May 4 to June 8, 1996 and *Chen Zhen: Dancing Body Drumming Mind* was scheduled for November 11 to December 23, 2000. Sadly, Chen Zhen died before he could complete the project in 2000. This exhibit was eventually presented in 2001 as part of a memorial exhibit held at the Serpentine Gallery in London

(<http://www.deitch.com/projects/sub.php?projId=129>).

artist living in Paris to being considered “*one of China’s* [my emphasis] most prominent vanguard artists” (Deitch Projects 1996).⁴²

The catalogue for Chen Zhen’s 1990 exhibit provides the first published mediation of his work. Entitled simply *Chen Zhen*, the catalogue includes colour images of the work and three short essays, one by each of the three curators, Hultén, Huin, and Sans.⁴³ These essays affirm the value of Chen’s work, following the same points of confirmation that Heinich noted in her study of the Marcel Duchamp Award (2014). The writers describe the artist’s repertoire (briefly, since this is the artist’s first show), place the artist’s work within the context of art history, explain the meaning of the work, and assert the artist’s originality – that is, they identify the singular dissident difference of the work and explain how it transcends some aesthetic, conceptual, or disciplinary frontier (Heinich 2014:14). Following this model, the writers affirm Chen Zhen’s place in the field through comparisons with established historical and living artists: the work of Robert Rauschenberg (Hultén), and of Andy Warhol, Joseph Kosuth, and Mario Merz

⁴² Since Chen Zhen’s death, his widow, Xu Min, has managed his artworks, and Sans and von Fürstenberg have continued to include Chen Zhen’s work in exhibits, which has helped retain his position on the art databases. A foundation for documenting and supporting the continued presentation of Chen Zhen’s work has been established, and Sans is listed as one of the directors. See Association des Amis de Chen Zhen (ADAC) (<http://www.chenzhen.org/>).

⁴³ There is no pagination in this small, 44-page catalogue. The three essays are written in French and Chinese on alternating pages in the first part of the catalogue, with English translation provided at the end of the catalogue after the exhibition images. I have used the English translation for my references and use the author’s last name to cite the location (Hultén, Huin, and Sans 1990).

(Huin). These comparisons indicate that Chen Zhen, like the authenticated artists named, is working within the dominant conceptual aesthetic of the contemporary field.

The writers, particularly Hultén and Huin, are also concerned to demonstrate that Chen Zhen, as a newcomer to the field, is not a poseur or mawkish copier of artistic precedents. Pontus Hultén notes:

we cannot help thinking about some of Rauschenberg's pieces. There is the same sharpness in thinking, the same lightness in the treatment of important, even serious, things. But these works are so different that the question of Rauschenberg did not even come up in the discussion with Chen Zhen (Hultén).

Similarly, Huin begins his essay by disparaging other contemporary artists who have succumbed to the "Buren" syndrome,⁴⁴ where their "artistic production is no more than an imitation of Duchamp's work" (Hultén). He then declares that "fortunately" there are "still some lone rangers who question themselves beyond fashion and what is called 'the market phenomenons [sic].'" These "lone rangers," Chen Zhen included, "stick to ethic and passion, silently develop a work implying a real questioning, and have a deliberately subversive nature" (Huin). In other words, such artists have an authentic commitment to their work, one that eschews the economic value of art and popular trends. Authenticity, as Heinich points out, is "what holds singularity, what guarantees it and what allows it to play positively on its ambivalence by constituting it as an asset rather than a stigma" (1998a:123). Authenticity then confirms that the "deliberately

⁴⁴ Referring to the highly successful French conceptual artist Daniel Buren.

subversive” or dissident nature of a contemporary work can be recognized as artistically singular and valuable.

In all of the essays, Chen Zhen’s transgressive and dissident difference is related to his obvious Chinese identity and alterity to the West. This is evidenced visually in his work by the use of Chinese calligraphic type, images from ancient China, and Romanized words referring to Chinese scholars. His conceptual difference is related in the writer’s description of Chen’s use of Taoist philosophy, *yin* and *yang* symbols, and reference to the five Chinese elements. Huin proposes that Chen Zhen approaches the world *differently* because of his Oriental origins. Huin explains that “we” as Westerners are focused on “external attitudes” and with systematizing and classifying our world with our “pathetic need for order and harmony” (Huin). Chen Zhen, on the other hand, immersed in his essential Chinese identity has a “perception of the world not erected as a system but one that espouses on the contrary its perpetual circle of influence” (Huin).

After asserting this dissident difference, the writers mediate its abnormality in relation to the normality of Western culture and art, which is also an important strategy for asserting the authenticity of Chen’s artistic difference in relation to the demands of the Western artistic field. Hultén’s essay focuses primarily on the juxtaposition between China and the West, rather than directly on Chen Zhen’s work. He begins by noting how Chen Zhen assures him that “China is still the same.” China, Hultén muses, “seems so much closer to us than other remote countries” and “appears as a country

which has been ‘modern’ for a long time, in other words, full of our contradictions and current conflicts” (Hultén). Such statements assure the reader that while different, Chen Zhen, like China itself, still bears a familiarity that can soften the “shock” of cultural difference. Thus, Hultén concludes that “ancient and modern China is close to us and at the same time quite far” (Hultén). As a result, Chen Zhen’s work is like an inversion of the West. As Hultén writes,

in his art, Chen Zhen plays on a wide range of subtle elements: symmetry which is not symmetry, fake which is declared fake from the start, contrasts often emphasized up to nonsense, between what looks old and what is new, the colors so dull and so unusual that they could even have provoked nausea, etc....” (Hultén)

For Hultén, it is this dizzying (if not “nausea”-inducing) contrast, coupled with the “surprising” sameness of what Chen Zhen’s Chinese identity represents, that is Chen’s dissident difference.⁴⁵ As in Christine Rugemer’s critical analysis of cultural contrasts in *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), Hultén distinguishes a challenge to Western cultural concepts, but at the same time

⁴⁵ Chen Zhen’s Chinese identity and the theme of contrasts presented in the essays are also emphasized by the catalogue design. The show title on the front cover (and repeated on the back cover) is simply *Chen Zhen*, presented in a block of white text against a stone-like gray ground. Beside the Romanized name is Chen’s name in stylized Chinese characters, placed as if to mirror the Romanized name. Inside, the French essays are similarly mirrored with French on the left and Chinese text on the right. The Chinese text is further contrasted by being printed in white on a black background and written vertically and from right to left in traditional fashion. The characters serve, on the one hand, as an artistic affectation designed to make the Chinese origins of the work and the artist more obvious, and, on the other hand, as a visual mirror of the contrasts that curators claim Chen Zhen’s work represents.

affirms that Chen's work (and China) retain enough similarity and authenticity to be recognized as contemporary art.

The valorization of the transformative qualities of Chen Zhen's work – as the work of a Chinese dissident artist distinguished by cultural difference – is especially evident in Jérôme Sans' contribution to the catalogue. He presents Chen Zhen as a hero who has come from another place bearing a gift that will free the West from its fixation on consumerism and waste. Chen Zhen, he says, confronts “all the ambiguity born from an oriental calligraphy serving the occidental world's consumer strategy. This is a strategy based on fantasy and frustration, whose motto is consumption” (Sans). Moreover, Chen Zhen's project “takes place in the relationship which links man, products or the consumer society itself with nature” (Sans). Thus, taking found and discarded consumer objects – the detritus of Occidental society – Chen Zhen reconstructs the objects as art and gives them a renewed “spirit.” As Sans claims, “retrieving the spirit of the object or giving spirit to the object, this is Chen Zhen's will.” Drawing on ancient Chinese traditions, Chen Zhen offers redemption of sorts through this ancient wisdom and “inversion” of Western practices – something that Huin declares is “fundamental” to both Chen Zhen's work and his Chinese identity.

This first published interpretation of the dissident qualities of Chen Zhen's work, despite the very recent events in Beijing, relies primarily on valorizing Chen Zhen's cultural difference in relation to the West rather than on a difference with China or Chinese political policy. Hultén's text makes

immediate mention of China but only subtly alludes to the recent political events by referring to “current conflicts.” Huin, on the other hand, is more forthright but cautious. Huin writes,

undoubtedly, some people will warn me against the seductions of far eastern exoticism, recently put in the limelight under awful circumstances, the clash, or the synthesis between two cultures, the esoteric nature of the philosophies of the celestial empire, Mao, who knows what else.

With no direct reference to the “awful circumstances” in his work, the authors appear to be cautious about attributing anything other than an aesthetic and cultural dissidence to Chen Zhen’s work. Still, as in Jean-Hubert Martin’s validation of the Chinese artists for *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, references to the “circumstances” and “Mao” help to situate Chen Zhen in a kind of liminal zone between East and West. While he is *of* China, he is also by his very presence in France *outside* of China’s political influence. It would be some years later that Chen Zhen would be more pointedly valued as a politically dissident Chinese artist.

The belated attribution of political dissidence, especially in texts related to individual artists, appears to be the case for the majority of the artists in this study. My interviews revealed that none of the artists claim to have left China as dissidents or exiles and, at least early in their careers, avoided obvious political statements. The choice to migrate to France was based on the opportunities that the move offered to their artistic careers, or they moved for personal reasons, following family or friends. Only Wang Du and Wang Keping have been publically recognized for their politically

dissident activities in China, a label that Wang Du adamantly resists.⁴⁶ In our interview he explained how he had been offered help by democracy organizations when he first arrived in France. “I did not want to accept this help. I immigrated. It has nothing to do with exile,” he stated. Still, curators have not hesitated to attribute political dissidence to Chinese artists even when they have not used the words directly, as the case of Wang Du indicates. A small exhibition catalogue, *Chen Zhen: The Body as Language*, from 2007, also demonstrates this belated attribution. Here, curator Gerald Matt calls Chen Zhen a “boundary crosser, a ‘cultural homeless,’ who created symbolical trajectories between different realities” (2007:6). After describing one of Chen Zhen’s works, he then outlines Chen Zhen’s singular contribution to the field. Chen Zhen came “in a time when art discourse was dominated by the idea of ethnocentrism” and “provided ethical and aesthetic maxims which brought the critique of globalization, interculturalism, and ethnicity into international circulation with compelling farsightedness” (2007:6). This wisdom is then contrasted not only to Chen Zhen’s interest in ancient Chinese practices, but also in relation to the political and artistic situation in China of the recent past. Matt continues:

Now, more than thirty years after Cultural Revolution [sic] and the death of Mao Zedong, a many-faced and dynamic art scene has established in China, which has also set out to roll up the international art market at a rapid pace. Chen’s career as an artist exemplarily stands for the beginning of this development which took place under

⁴⁶ Wang was recognized as a political dissident in the media in France in 1990. As he explained in our interview, his journalist wife, Agnès Gaudu, publically petitioned the French government to lobby for Wang’s release from prison in China.

the burning glass of enormous political and economic changes. Isolation, censorship, and constant repression by the Chinese Communist Party informed a climate in which a political threat was suspected to linger behind every new artwork. Together with Huang Yongping and Cai Guo-Qiang, Chen Zhen counted among those outstanding artists of the Chinese avant-garde, who, disillusioned by post-Maoist reform policies, left China in the mid-1980s (6).

Here, seven years after Chen Zhen's death, Matt suggests that Chen Zhen left China for political reasons, was living in exile, and was intent upon addressing this subject in his work. Contrary to this view, Chen Zhen never belonged to any radical art groups in China, did not participate in the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit, was not forced to leave, and never spoke of leaving China for political reasons. Instead, he had travelled to France to study art. In his own writing, Chen Zhen emphasized that the production of his work was influenced not by exile as much as by his intercultural experience, something he called "trans-experience." Chen Zhen explained that the word "trans-experience" "summarizes vividly and profoundly the complex life experiences of leaving one's native place and going from one place to another in one's life" (Chen Zhen 2003:153). He did not mean this as an opposition between nations or ideologies but, rather, as an "internal 'loneliness of spirituality and the overlapping of life experiences,' a type of 'cultural homelessness,' namely you do not belong to anybody, yet you are in possession of everything" (15). Still, Matt concludes that "it was the *self-chosen exile* [my emphasis] which sharpened his awareness of the fleeting, hybrid transitory of today's cultural and civilizational processes" (2007:7). The suggestion here is that Chen Zhen's singularity is bound up with a

politically dissident gesture that names him, however unwillingly, as a Chinese dissident artist.

In migrating to France, the nine artists in this study crossed global boundaries and entered a new artistic and political territory. Even if they did not mean this move to be a provocative gesture or an exile, the art world has often “hailed” them, as Stuart Hall calls it (1996a:5), into the identity of the Chinese artist as dissident. As I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter, the recognition of the artists’ singular difference in the artistic field has come from a combination of factors – their development of important social relations in the field, their strategy for meeting the artistic demands of the field, and how their identity has been understood within the Western context, especially after the Tiananmen Square incident. None of these factors work in isolation. Rather, it is in their integration that the Chinese artist as dissident is recognized – that is, as an artist whose identity bears the “close but far” cultural and political differences that are valorized for the transformative potential they bring to the West. As the example of Chen Zhen demonstrates, the political dissidence of Chinese artists is not always overt or professed by the artists themselves. Rather, in coming to the West – whether in person or represented by their artworks – Chinese artists move into a foreign territory where they are hailed into an identity that is at once artistic, political, and provocative.

Chapter Five

Territorial Provocation: Chinese Artists in a Global Context

Of course, the national pavilion represents a system of power, a certain kind of history. But the challenge lies in this act of provocation in relation to the definition of a territory.

Curator Hou Hanru on the French Pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale (Hou and Zacharopoulos 1999:13)

In an unprecedented effort to encourage a cultural and artistic “dialogue” and to emphasize the nation’s cultural multiplicity, France chose two artists for its pavilion at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999: Huang Yong Ping and Jean-Pierre Bertrand (Hou and Zacharopoulos 1999). Huang Yong Ping, a Chinese expatriate, had resided and worked as an artist in France for 10 years. Jean-Pierre Bertrand (b. 1937) is a native French artist who works primarily with two-dimensional media but also utilizes installation and video.¹ Bertrand’s work for the pavilion was inspired by the tale of Robinson Crusoe, and explored the cultural connotations of natural materials such as salt, lemon, and honey (Hou and Zacharopoulos 1999). Bertrand’s work was presented in the interior of the small, neo-classical pavilion, while Huang Yong Ping’s large sculptural installation was located outside the pavilion (Figure 11). Huang’s work consisted of nine tall wooden poles that pierced through the portico and roof of the pavilion. Each pole was topped by an

¹ Interestingly, no mention is made in the exhibition catalogue or reviews that Huang and Bertrand both took part in *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989, Bertrand as a Western artist and Huang as a non-Western artist (Martin 1989).

animal figure from the Chinese zodiac. A few meters away, a small figure of a man on a wooden compass chariot pointed towards the pavilion.² Visually, Huang's massive poles interrupted the classical conformity of the exterior of the pavilion while on the inside they intersected and disturbed the space occupied by Bertrand's exhibit.



Figure 11. Huang Yong Ping, *Un homme, neuf animaux/One Man, Nine Animals*, 48th Biennale de Venise pavillon français, 1999.
© Huang Yong Ping/SODRAC (2015).

² France follows an unusual method for assigning artists to represent the nation at the Biennale. As Huang Yong Ping related to me in our interview for this study, a government committee first selects the artists, and then the artists select their own curator. Huang selected Hou Hanru and Jean-Pierre Bertrand selected Denys Zacharopoulos. The selection of the two artists, as Huang relates in an excerpted text from 1999, was meant to establish an artistic “dialogue.” The dialogue, however, was not without its tensions between the two artists (Vergne and Chong 2005:88).

The reaction in France to this national representation was mixed. Recognizing the intervention of cultural alterity in Huang's work over the past 10 years, Philippe Piguet, the critic for the art journal *L'Oeil*, deemed the artistic selection a fitting choice, considering the overall theme of the 48th Biennale:

In the context of the opening address of the Venice Biennale and the desire for extraterritoriality expressed by Harald Szeemann [the Biennale curator], this capacity for the collusion of cultures, which requires a notable attention to the other, explains the choice made by France to invite Huang Yong Ping to share the national pavilion with Jean-Pierre Bertrand (Piguet 1999).³

Catherine Millet, however, a leading French art critic and editor of France's most important contemporary art magazine *artpress*, was clearly shocked and repulsed by the selection. "As for the French Pavilion" she writes in her review,

the horrible creatures by Huang Yong Ping that surmount the roof disrupt the atmosphere generated by the installation of his co-occupant, Jean-Pierre Bertrand. The former is not worthy of such an honor (but then the French organizers seem so glad to have their own 'Chinese'); the latter does not deserve such punishment (Millet 1999:68).⁴

Harry Bellet, the critic for *Le Monde*, took a more conciliatory view by recognizing how the pavilion met the French organizer's aim to represent

³ From the French. My translation. "Dans le contexte d'ouverture de la Biennale de Venise et le souhait d'extraterritorialité exprimé par Harald Szeemann, cette capacité à la collusion des cultures, qui requiert une éminente attention à l'autre, explique le choix qu'a fait la France d'inviter Huang Yong Ping à partager le pavillon national avec Jean-Pierre Bertrand" (Piguet 1999).

⁴ *Artpress* became a bilingual (French and English) journal in 1992. I quote the English translation. No translator credit was given.

“the universality of France, the land of welcome” (Bellet 1999a)⁵ and proposed that it is the “friction of two diverse personalities” of the artists that “allows for the strange harmony of the French pavilion” (Bellet 1999a).⁶

These three reviews provide a good example of how the introduction of a Chinese artist into the artistic and political territory of the liberal-democratic West instigates a dissident provocation, one that follows the three-hand game of transgression, reaction, and integration (Heinich 1998a). In each of these reviews, Huang is identified as the disruptive anomaly – artistic and cultural – in a contemporary art space that also represents France as a nation. In Piguet’s interpretation, Huang has been “invited” to “share” the pavilion with Bertrand whose identity and place within French territory is not questioned. Millet then provides the “negative reaction” and “scandalized refusal” (Heinich 1998a:330), questioning the selection of Huang on the basis of how his foreign aesthetic compromises the integrity of Bertrand’s work. Bellet then plays the integrative hand – much like Goude’s aestheticized contrasts in the bicentennial parade – by interpreting Huang’s intrusion as a transformative gesture, one that envisions the present and future France as a multicultural and universally inclusive political space.⁷

⁵ From the French. My translation. “Pour Olivier Poivre d'Arvor, directeur de l'Association française d'action artistique (AFAA), il s'agissait de montrer l'universalité de la France, terre d'accueil” (Bellet 1999a).

⁶ From the French. My translation. “C'est peut-être ce frottement de deux personnalités aussi différentes que celles de Jean-Pierre Bertrand, né en 1937 à Paris, et de Huang Yongping, né en 1954 à Xiamen, qui permet l'étrange harmonie du pavillon français” (Bellet 1999a).

⁷ None of the three reviews mention that Huang was not a French citizen when he was asked to represent France at the Biennale. According to Huang

In her reaction, Millet also notes the significance of Huang's identity as a Chinese national and that "the French organizers seem so glad to have their own 'Chinese'" (1999). Here she is identifying Huang as one of more than 20 Chinese nationals who were featured in the Biennale that year without China's official sponsorship.⁸ As Millet observes in her review:

by inviting a considerable number of Chinese artists (who, it must be said, are already fairly prominent on the international scene), Szeemann has ipso facto added another national selection to those presented through the official channels (1999:68).

Even if, like Huang, a number of these artists no longer lived in China, Millet points to the provocative power of an artist identified as Chinese when presented in an international forum such as the Biennale. As Hou Hanru, one of the two curators of the pavilion suggests in his catalogue essay, the provocation of such a gesture is determined in relation to the systems of power and the history that define the particular territory (Hou and Zacharopoulos 1999:13).

Taking an historical, and more expansive geographical view, this chapter considers the valorization of Chinese contemporary art after the Tiananmen Square incident and in relation to the liberal-democratic territories where it has been presented. Shortly after the incident, Chinese artists were featured in a number of dedicated group exhibitions in France

in our interview, the French government quickly remedied this situation by granting citizenship to Huang and his wife, Shen Yuan, at the opening of the Biennale.

⁸ Millet's review covered the Biennale as a whole. She also mentions, more positively, the work of other Chinese artists. For example, Millet notes Chen Zhen's work, but makes no mention that Chen developed his contemporary work while living in France since 1986 (Millet 1999).

and other Western nations. In most cases, Western academics or Chinese expatriates curated these exhibits. Presented from 1989-1993, these early Chinese-themed exhibits are the first significant introduction of Chinese contemporary art as a specific genre. The exhibits were meant to represent the most current and contemporary art from China – yet China, as a nation, was not involved in their production. China, in fact, would not host an exhibit of its contemporary art outside of China until 2001.⁹ The chapter begins then with an analysis of two of the first exhibits to be held in the West, both in France in 1989 and 1990. Following Heinrich’s model for understanding how contemporary art is valued and accredited, the analysis considers how the curators and/or organizers of these exhibits mediated the contemporaneity of the art – that is distinguished its dissident singularity – in relation to the political tensions between China and the West immediately following the Tiananmen Square incident. France, however, provided just one stage towards accreditation in an artistic field that was largely international by the early 1990s. For this reason, I also consider how Chinese art was mediated in two larger exhibits presented in 1993 in Berlin and Hong Kong. I return then to the global context of the Venice Biennale where, in 1993 and 1999, large contingents of Chinese artists were presented without the official

⁹ *Living in Time*, an exhibit of 29 Chinese artists presented at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin, was the first official exhibit of contemporary art that China organized in cooperation with a foreign nation. This exhibit was followed by *Alors, la Chine?* at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 2003. This exhibit was part of a two-year cultural exchange with France. Also see Meiqin Wang’s studies on China’s presentation of its contemporary art outside of China (2007; 2009).

sponsorship of China. Within the context of the liberal-democratic West, each of these exhibits plays the provocative first hand of a contemporary art game that has contributed to the valorization of Chinese artists as artistically and politically dissident.

The Tiananmen Square incident, as I have emphasized in previous chapters, played an important role in shaping the Western political imaginary of China and the dissident identity of Chinese artists. In the late 1970s, the relationship between China and the West was warming as Deng Xiaoping and the CCP initiated a more culturally and economically open China. Diplomatic relationships after a long Cold War were gradually reestablished and trade, investment, and cultural exchanges helped create a more amenable relationship throughout the 1980s. Ongoing issues such as China's claim to Taiwan, China's presence in Tibet, and what the West perceived as human rights violations within China continued to be of concern but were addressed through cooperation and diplomacy. The Tiananmen Square incident, however, as Jean-Pierre Cabestan notes, put an abrupt end to this "cooperation" (2006:327). Immediately following the incident the European nations, along with the United States, Canada, and Australia, imposed diplomatic and trade embargoes on China. And, much to China's disapproval, many of these same nations offered asylum to Chinese nationals living in their countries at the time (Shambaugh 1992:110; Cabestan 2006:332; Kreutz 2004:46). China was especially incensed with France. As David Shambaugh notes, France "gave sanctuary and political asylum to

numerous Chinese involved in the democracy movement” and, a few months later, even gave them “a place in the bicentenary parade on Bastille Day” (1992:110). The political tensions that followed the Tiananmen Square incident have, then, significantly coloured the relationship between China and the West.

The Tiananmen Square incident also deeply affected the artistic community in China. Artists in Beijing and other cities across China actively participated in pro-democracy demonstrations. During the protests, for example, students from the Central Academy of Art produced the iconic statue “Goddess of Democracy” (Wu [1991] 2008:68) and, according to Hans van Dijk and Andreas Schmid (two Westerners living in China at the time), artists “marched under the banner of the popular art journal ‘Fine Arts in China’ and the no U-turn symbol of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit” (van Dijk and Schmid 1993:29). Shortly after June 4, Gao Minglu relates how some “hard-liners” deemed the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit “a small Tian’anmen Square of the art world” and a precursor to student protests that spring (Gao 2011:166). Thus, despite the triumph of *China/Avant-Garde*, avant-garde art exhibits were no longer publicly supported, and artists had to move to more discreet and underground locations after the Tiananmen Square incident (van Dijk and Schmid 1993:37; Gao 2005:71-79; Li 1993:XIX). Many artists and intellectuals also lost their jobs or fled the country. Gao Minglu and Li Xianting, the two primary organizers of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit, for example, lost their positions as editors of China’s leading art magazines and

Gao Minglu emigrated to the United States.¹⁰ For many artists, the incident also represented a major loss of hope. As artist Gu Xiong, a member of the '85 Movement and a participant in the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit, related to me in our interview in Canada in 2011, he was excited about the changes in China before 1989. He and other artists believed that *China/Avant-Garde* heralded a new future for the arts and life in China. By late May 1989, with protests spreading across China, Gu sensed a turn in direction. He traveled to Beijing from his home in Chongqing in order to apply for a visa to Canada, and it was purely by chance that he was in Beijing to witness the carnage on June 4. As he related to me, "I saw the fire trucks, buses, and dead bodies. That is why I was totally disappointed. I lost my hope. I believed that we could have a better life."

As indelible and traumatic as the event was for artists like Gu Xiong and others, the significance of the Tiananmen Square incident in China is represented by silence and censure. The incident is one of several sensitive topics that are not mentioned in China. In the West the significance of this event continues to be emphasized in the media, on the Internet, in academic studies, and through annual memorials. With these two contrasting responses it is difficult not to consider the political dimension that the Tiananmen Square incident brings to the dissident value attributed to Chinese artists and to the Chinese-themed art exhibits in the West after

¹⁰ Li Xianting was editor-in-chief of *Fine Arts in China* (Noth, Pöhlmann & Reschke 1993:XXII) and Gao Minglu was editor of *Meishu (Art Monthly)* (Gao 2005:375).

1989.¹¹

The impact of the Tiananmen Square incident in the presentation of Chinese contemporary art in the West is evident in the first two exhibits of Chinese art to be featured in France after the event: *Tian'anmen 4 juin-4 décembre: Je n'oublie pas (Tiananmen: June 4 – December 4: I have not forgotten)*,¹² and *Art Chinois 1990: Chine demain pour hier (Chinese Art 1990: China Tomorrow for Yesterday)*. The first exhibit, held in December 1989, was designed to convey a strong message of political censure directed at China while the second exhibit, held in the summer of 1990, took a more nuanced approach to the political situation in China. In the first exhibit the Tiananmen Square incident figured strongly as an inspiration for the exhibit and the artwork while the second exhibit placed a greater emphasis on the

¹¹ The different views on the Tiananmen Square incident and its relationship to contemporary art are evident in the published histories of Chinese contemporary art. In both Chinese and Western publications, the history of Chinese contemporary art is typically divided into three periods: the developments of the late 1970s culminating with the Stars exhibition in 1980, the '85 Movement from the early 1980s to 1989, and the developments in art from 1990 onward. All of the histories published in the West note the significance of the Tiananmen Square incident and the difficulties artists faced following the event. The Chinese publications, on the other hand, such as Lü Peng's history of Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s, mention the student unrest in Beijing that began in April 1989 and ended on June 4. He then moves on to discuss the work of the 1990s with no further elaboration (Lü Peng 2000:9). Other authors, such as Lu Hong, provide a more in-depth explanation that attributes the artistic changes to a "disjointed social situation" around 1989, without actually mentioning the dates or the event (Lu Hong 2006:1-5).

¹² The catalogue cover also featured a Chinese title in traditional characters: 牢記六月四日天安門. The catalogue was published in French with a Chinese translation for Badinter's preface and some of the names and information on individual artists.

artistic value of Chinese contemporary art. Important in both cases is how the Tiananmen Square Incident serves as a catalyst for recognizing the artistic and political dissidence of Chinese contemporary art and artists.

Tian'anmen 4 juin-4 décembre: Je n'oublie pas took place from December 4 to 11, 1989, and it was clearly designed to make a strong dissident statement in response to the Tiananmen Square incident. The exhibit was presented in the Galerie du forum at the Pompidou Centre in Paris (an art space dedicated to small community exhibits), and organized by special interest groups and individuals closely associated with the French government. Three groups organized the exhibit: Solidarité Chine, L'Association de liaison avec les intellectuels Chinois en exil (Association in Liaison with Chinese Intellectuals in Exile) (A.L.I.C.E.), and the France-Libertés Foundation (France-Liberty Foundation). The latter organization, founded in 1986 by Danielle Mitterrand, President Mitterrand's spouse, is dedicated to the promotion of human rights and the defense of individuals who suffer from "oppressive, authoritarian regimes."¹³ Elisabeth Badinter, who wrote the preface to the accompanying exhibition catalogue (Badinter 1989), was also connected to the government as the wife of Robert Badinter, the Minister of Justice. In the preface, "Six mois après, la solidarité reste nécessaire (Six Months Later, Solidarity Remains Necessary)," Badinter explains the parameters and purpose of the show. The exhibit included the work of "three generations of Chinese artists living in Europe, for the most

¹³ See <http://www.france-libertes.org/Notre-histoire,2217.html>.

part originating from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan” (1989).¹⁴ The artists were “known and lesser known, painters, calligraphers and sculptors, reunited in an exhibit to express their will to remember” (1989).¹⁵ Badinter goes on to describe, in very graphic and emotional language, the tragedy that took place in Tiananmen Square. In “the heart of Beijing,” she writes, “a regime at bay used its army to murder its youth and to break a huge popular democracy movement” (1989).¹⁶ The primary objective of the exhibit was then to provide a forum for Chinese artists and the organizers to “express their solidarity and their emotion” (Badinter 1989).¹⁷

The artworks reproduced in the exhibit catalogue appear to have been made to meet the very political objective of the show. Most works are dated 1989 and have titles that suggest a link to the Tiananmen Square incident. For example, a work by an artist who goes only by the name, Tai, is titled *Le 4 Juin 1989*, while Clara Choy titled her work *La prière de liberté (Prayer of Freedom)*. Two artists from this study, Wang Keping and Ru Xiaofan, participated in the exhibit. Wang Keping, who had avoided political

¹⁴ The catalogue is not paginated. Badinter’s preface is a single page and is located on the second page of the catalogue.

¹⁵ From the French. My translation. “Voici trois générations d’artistes chinois vivant en Europe, pour la plupart originaires de Chine populaire, de Hong-Kong et de Taiwan, connus et moins connus, peintres, calligraphes et sculpteurs, réunis dans une même exposition pour exprimer leur volonté de se souvenir” (Badinter 1989).

¹⁶ From the French. My translation. “Il y a six mois, une tragédie s’est jouée place Tian Anmen [sic], au coeur de Pékin. Un régime aux abois a utilisé son armée pour assassiner sa jeunesse et briser un gigantesque élan populaire vers plus de démocratie” (Badinter 1989).

¹⁷ From the French. My translation. “Il en est ainsi des artistes réunis dans cette exposition qui, malgré pressions et difficultés, ont voulu exprimer leur solidarité et leur émotion” (Badinter 1989).

associations in his work since arriving in France, presented a bronze cast of his 1978 wood sculpture, *Silence*, a work originally exhibited in the controversial 1980 Stars exhibit in Beijing. Ru Xiaofan took a more abstract approach by submitting a non-representational abstract painting titled *No Comment* (1989).

Despite the close political connections of some of the organizers, the prestigious location at the Pompidou, and the censorious nature of the artwork, the art press did not review *Tian'anmen 4 juin-4 décembre* (nor was I able to find a reaction to the show by the Chinese government). In fact, this exhibit is not recorded in the chronologies of Chinese contemporary art, likely because none of the artists involved have subsequently gained significant recognition in the contemporary art field. I was only made aware of the exhibit through my research at the Kandinsky Library at the Pompidou Centre. The organizers of the exhibit also did not include contemporary curators who could have been instrumental in vetting Chinese artists in the West. Without some support from contemporary institutions and their agents, the exhibit then appears primarily as a politically-dissident protest. Still, this dissident gesture is important. Presented in France and sponsored by political interest groups, *Tian'anmen 4 juin-4 décembre* represents a growing relationship between Chinese art, political dissidence, and liberal-democratic values such as human rights and freedom of expression.

Just one year after the Tiananmen Square incident, *Art Chinois 1990: Chine demain pour hier*, took a much different curatorial approach. Rather

than focus on the Tiananmen Square incident, the exhibit emphasized the artistic value of Chinese contemporary art. This shift likely derives as much from the political relationship between China and France as from specific demands of the artistic field. According to Shambaugh, “most of the West European sanctions on China resulting from Tiananmen were lifted during the summer of 1990” (Shambaugh 1992:111) and France normalized its relationships with China by the spring of 1991 (Cabestan 2006:327). For France and other Euro-American nations, the economic and diplomatic sanctions imposed on China immediately following the Tiananmen Square incident presented a conundrum: despite its disapproval of China’s actions in 1989, the West wanted to maintain and develop investment and trade. By 1993, all of the Western nations were taking a more tempered approach, one that favoured a balance of sanctions along with continued dialogue and trade (Sandschneider 2002; Kreutz 2004; Cabestan 2006). At the same time, after *Magiciens de la Terre*, Chinese artists had been noticed. If they were to be taken seriously within the field, the artists and their supporting agents needed to demonstrate that Chinese contemporary art was more than just a passing political protest or new exotic commodity, as Pontus Hultén appears to suggest in his essay on Chen Zhen in 1990 (see Chapter Four). A more politically nuanced presentation of Chinese-themed exhibits, then, benefited the artistic field as well as a political field that did not necessarily want to inflame diplomatic relationships.

Located far from the artistic and political centre of Paris, *Chine demain pour hier* reflects these dual objectives: a tempered political approach coupled with an emphasis on legitimizing Chinese contemporary artists in the West by distinguishing their distinctive artistic difference. Curated by Fei Dawei, the Chinese consultant for *Magiciens de la Terre*, *Chine demain pour hier* featured six expatriate Chinese artists: Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, Chen Zhen, Yan Pei-Ming, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Gu Wenda (Fei 1990).¹⁸ The site-specific installations were presented at different indoor and outdoor locations in the small southern village of Pourrières. The exhibit was hosted by the local arts organization, Les Domaines de l'art of Aix en Provence, but also funded by the Association Française d'Action Artistique (AFAA). Established in 1922 to facilitate the cultural dialogue between France and other nations, the AFAA works directly under the mandate of the French foreign affairs office and in coordination with the Ministry of Culture in sponsoring and organizing exhibits of French art outside of France and supporting exhibits of foreign art in France (AFAA 1992). The contribution of the AFAA in this exhibit establishes a definite political connection with French national interests, an interest that is itself provocative since there is

¹⁸ The exhibit was held from July 7 to 31, 1990. All of the artists are from the PRC but emigrated prior to, or in, 1989. Huang, Yang, Chen, and Yan moved to France, while Gu was a resident of the United States and Cai a resident of Japan. Four Chinese composer/musicians also took part in events related to the exhibit. I would like to express my special thanks to Jean-Louis Laurenti, who was part of the 1990 production of *Chine demain pour hier* and who assisted me in acquiring a copy of the exhibition catalogue.

no reciprocal contribution from China other than the involvement of émigré artists and a curator.

The objectives of the exhibit and the accompanying symposium¹⁹ were twofold: to meet the cultural exchange objectives of the AFAA and to validate the singularity and authenticity of Chinese contemporary art. As Fei Dawei outlined in the exhibition catalogue:

My basic idea, for some time, has been to create a new dialogue between China and the West. There exists an essentially traditional dialogue between these two cultural entities. The Western contemporary world dialogues mostly with the ancient oriental world. There is no real dialogue between contemporaries. It is, above all, this imbalance that led me to design this exhibition. The second reason, more objective, comes from the fact that for the past 10 years, there has been an intellectual movement and cultural reality in China that is absolutely unknown in the West. One knows that there are Chinese artists who have followed a Western education, but no one has any idea that there exists an autonomous artistic movement (Fei and Marcadé 1990:14).²⁰

Recalling the curatorial objectives of both *China/Avant-Garde* and *Magiciens de la Terre*, Fei's primary plan was not to protest China's recent political

¹⁹ The symposium was entitled "Malentendu culturel" (Cultural Misunderstanding) and the participants included the artists along with Fei Dawei, Hou Hanru, Marc Le Bot, Bernard Marcadé, Pan Taifan, Monica Dematte, Noël Dutrait, Chiba Shigeo, Yves Michaud, Leonid Plioutchitch, Christan Poitevin, and Wu Mali (Fei 1990).

²⁰ From the French. My translation. "Mon idée essentielle a, depuis longtemps, été de créer un dialogue de type nouveau entre la Chine et l'Occident. Il existe un dialogue essentiellement traditionnel entre ces deux entités culturelles. Le monde contemporain occidental dialogue le plus souvent avec le monde oriental ancien. Il n'y a pas vraiment de dialogue entre les contemporains. C'est avant tout ce déséquilibre qui m'a ammené [sic] à concevoir cette exposition. La seconde raison, plus objective, vient du fait que depuis 10 ans, il existe un mouvement intellectuel et culturel réel en Chine qui n'est absolument pas connu de l'Occident. On savait qu'il existait des artistes chinois qui avaient suivi un enseignement occidental, mais personne n'avait l'idée qu'il puisse exister un mouvement artistique autonome" (Fei and Marcadé 1990:14).

actions but to gain recognition for Chinese artists. Like the organizers of *China/Avant-Garde*, he was eager to demonstrate the contemporaneity and autonomy of Chinese artists without emphasizing political dissidence. The year before, *Magiciens de la Terre* had opened a space in the contemporary artistic field for the recognition of artists from outside the West and, in doing so, initiated a disagreement over what is art and who may be an artist. Fei notes, “My intention is to continue to establish the dialogue inaugurated by *Magicians of the Earth*” (14).²¹ This latter exhibit, then, provided him with a model for mediating the singular differences of the artists’ work on the basis of their artistic practice and cultural rather than political differences within the Western context.

As Nathalie Heinich’s studies have demonstrated, the agents of the artistic institutions that mediate the recognition of art and artists follow a similar pattern of discourse (Heinich 2014:14). They trace an artist’s repertoire of work to demonstrate a serious and committed practice. They place the artist’s work within the context of art history to demonstrate how it fits with previous works and how it differs or transgresses these same historical precedents. Difference or singularity is then justified by interpretation, assertions of difference, and an explanation of how the work displaces a frontier or boundary (whether aesthetic or conceptual). Fei’s curatorial approach demonstrates a good understanding of these

²¹ From the French. My translation. “Ma volonté est de continuer à instaurer ce dialogue inauguré par les *Magiciens de la terre*” (Fei and Marcadé 1990:14).

requirements, especially in light of the fact that he was introducing new and relatively unknown, non-Western artists to an audience largely unfamiliar with China or Chinese art. Unlike *Tian'anmen 4 juin-4 décembre*, Fei included only artists who work with contemporary media and practices.²² All of the artists had also exhibited at least once in a contemporary venue in either France or the United States before 1990, a fact that helped to substantiate the authenticity and commitment of the artists within the contemporary and international context. Also, none of the works in the exhibit or their titles could be construed as related to Tiananmen Square or even Chinese politics. Rather, the work demonstrated a contemporaneity reflected in the conceptual approach and media used. For example, Chen Zhen created a sculptural installation in a forest, where he hung discarded appliances and other objects from the trees (Figure 12). The work was titled *Un Monde accroché/détaché* (*One world attached/detached*). Yang Jiechang did a performance in a small chapel and displayed a layered ink painting similar to the ones he had exhibited at *Magiciens*, entitled *Hundred Layers of Ink* (Chapter Four, Figure 5). And, Yan Pei-Ming painted large abstract portraits in black and white on doors throughout the village.

²² It is interesting to note the Fei did not include Wang Keping and Ru Xiaofan in this exhibit, even though they were both residing in France at the time. As discussed in the previous chapter, the work of these two artists does not fit easily into contemporary practice because of their choice of media and approach.



Figure 12. Chen Zhen, *Un Monde accroché/détaché*, 1990. Installation for *Chine demain pour hier*, Pourrières, France. © Chen Zhen.

Chine demain pour hier was also accompanied by an exhibition catalogue. The catalogue, produced in French, includes interviews and essays by an international slate of academics and historians. As a new unknown curator, Fei had little in the way of social capital of his own at the time, and the inclusion of other academics, especially European academics, provides greater credibility for his assertion that Chinese contemporary art should be recognized. Thus, the catalogue includes a detailed chronology of Chinese contemporary art from 1978 to 1989 written by Gao Minglu, a study of the Chinese avant-garde movement by Chinese sociologist Tong Dian, and a history of Chinese art written by Chen Tin Teh, a Taiwanese art historian – all of which provide an historical foundation for the new art, especially for a French audience largely unfamiliar with the development of Chinese art. The catalogue also includes an interview between Fei and Bernard Marcadé, an

art historian who is important for introducing the work of Yan Pei-Ming in France (Marcadé 1988; 1989), and interviews conducted by curator Jérôme Sans with Chen Zhen and Huang Yong Ping. Participants at the accompanying symposium also contributed essays. These include essays by Monica Dematté, an Italian art historian specializing in Asian art; Chiba Shigeo, a Japanese curator from the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo; French art historian Marc Le Bot; Noël Dutrait, a French academic specializing in Chinese literature; and French critic and director of l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-arts de Paris Yves Michaud. As a recognized figure in the contemporary art field, Yves Michaud's contribution – the preface and an essay – is especially valuable. Even though he admits to being “neither a China specialist or a specialist of Chinese contemporary art” (1990b:23),²³ his name and texts provide a significant stamp of approval for a curator and artists who were, as yet, unknown in the field.

The catalogue texts are important for demonstrating and supporting Fei's claim that the new Chinese art is contemporary and singularly original. Like Jean-Hubert Martin and the other curators discussed in previous chapters, Fei notes the difference and originality of Chinese art in both its integration of distinctly Chinese themes, media, and images with recognizable Western practices, *and* in its avant-garde and dissident gesture directed towards the highly regulated field of art in China. In his interview with Marcadé, Fei discusses the challenge Chinese artists face in meeting the

²³ From the French. My translation. “Même si je ne suis ni un spécialiste de la Chine ni un spécialiste d'art chinois contemporain” (Michaud 1990b:23).

demands of the contemporary art field – to be transgressively different but also the same. The challenge, he notes, for “many young Chinese artists is: how to differentiate this idea, this Western logic of the avant-garde? How to avoid a style, a brand image?” (Fei and Marcadé 1990:15).²⁴ Fei proposes that Chinese artists, especially the artists of the '85 Movement, do this by combining Western practices with their “re-discovery” of Chinese tradition (15). As he relates, the '85 Movement “artists turned to tradition, rediscovering it while very quickly giving it a new and contemporary spirit. It is this period that inspired a new interest in Taoism and Chinese Buddhism” (15).²⁵ Fei also stresses that the '85 Movement was a distinct artistic and intellectual movement that was responding to the socio-political situation in China at the time. After Marcadé mentions the Tiananmen Square incident and proposes that it presents an opportunity for a new dialogue between China and the West (Fei and Marcadé 1990:14), Fei responds, “today, the situation in China is much harder for artists and

²⁴ From the French. My translation. “La question de beaucoup de jeunes artistes chinois est: comment se différencier de cette idée, de cette logique occidentale de l'avant-garde? Comment éviter un style, une image de marque?” (Fei and Marcadé 1990:15).

²⁵ From the French. My Translation. “Ce mouvement se distingue radicalement de celui de début de la décennie qui n'avait eu de véritable importance qu'à Pékin et à Shangāi [sic]. Le ‘Mouvement 85’ touche tout le pays. Partout, fleurissent des expositions et des manifestations qui s'opposent au réalisme et à l'académisme. Les artistes se penchent sur la tradition, ils la redécouvrent en essayant très vite de lui donner un esprit nouveau et contemporain. A cette époque, on s'intéresse d'ailleurs à nouveau au Taoïsme et au Zen chinois” (Fei and Marcadé 1990:15).

intellectuals” (14).²⁶ Fei then describes the struggles artists have endured in China since the Cultural Revolution. Fei concludes by outlining how these struggles have affected the creative output of the '85 Movement:

it is important to know that academic painting, nudes and landscapes were banned in China. Propaganda painting was the only art permitted. The beginning of the 1980s was then characterized by a creative explosion that went in all possible and imaginable directions. What counted above all was the recovered freedom of expression, the possibility of criticizing the previous regime (14).²⁷

Thus, despite his objective to avoid a politically dissident interpretation of Chinese contemporary art, it is this political dimension of China's social situation combined with a new set of artistic practices and in contrast to Western art that once again highlights the singular difference of Chinese contemporary art. Chinese art is not limited to the incorporation of Chinese elements – words, images, and ideas – but represents a much larger political and intellectual movement that arises out of the contemporary experience of Chinese artists. Thus, Fei concludes that even if there “are formal similarities, the state of mind between China and the West remains radically different” (1990:16).²⁸

²⁶ From the French. My translation. “Aujourd'hui, la situation en Chine est beaucoup plus dure pour les artistes et les intellectuels” (Fei and Marcadé 1990:14).

²⁷ From the French. My translation. “Il faut savoir que même la peinture académique, de nus ou de paysages, était interdite en Chine. La peinture de propagande avait seule droit de cité. Le début des années 80 se caractérise donc par une explosion créative qui va dans tous les sens possibles et imaginables. Ce qui compte avant tout, c'est la liberté d'expression retrouvée, la possibilité de pouvoir critiquer la régime [sic] précédent” (Fei and Marcadé 1990:14).

²⁸ From the French. My translation. “Il existe un phénomène mondial et universel de l'art. Les différences existent malgré nous. Peut-être les

In his preface to the catalogue and in a separate essay, Yves Michaud concurs with Fei's interpretation of this "radical" difference (Michaud 1990a; 1990b) and provides further affirmation. In the preface, Michaud alludes to the Tiananmen Square incident and describes the exhibit as one that "avoids political commemorations without forgetting its woes" (1990a:9). Michaud points out how the title of the exhibit recalls this incident but also looks toward the future: "'China tomorrow for yesterday': 'For yesterday' as thought and tribute,' 'for tomorrow' as creation and life (Michaud 1990a:9).²⁹ Then, in his essay "China Demain: Avant-garde sans avant-garde ni armée" ("China Tomorrow: Avant-garde with neither avant-garde nor army"), Michaud focuses on the extraordinary political changes in the world and makes a comparison between Chinese and Soviet artists. Both, he notes, have responded to the "horrors of repression" (Michaud 1990b:23). Michaud concludes that the value of Chinese contemporary art is found not only in its blend of Western and Chinese elements but in its dissident reaction to such repression. Chinese art, for now, he concludes, has an "extreme diversity of

différences ne sont-elles pas affaire formelle ou de langage. Même si apparemment [sic] il existe des ressemblances formelles, l'état d'esprit entre la Chine et l'Occident demeure radicalement différent" (Fei and Marcadé 1990:16).

²⁹ From the French. My translation. "Dans ce projet de montrer la vitalité de la création chinoise là où on ne l'attendait pas, dans ce projet qui évite les commémorations politiques sans pour autant oublier les malheurs, les 'Domaines de l'art' devraient permettre à cette vitalité de s'affirmer à travers des installations, des rencontres, des concerts, à travers des interventions transitoires et momentanées qui gardent le sens de la vie. D'où, je suppose, au delà du jeu de mots, le titre de l'ensemble de la manifestation: 'Chine demain pour hier'. 'Pour hier' comme pensée et hommage, 'pour demain' comme création et vie" (Michaud 1990a:9).

orientations and vitality” (24), which he contrasts to “the absence of imagination and the unarticulated character and pasteurization of official art [in China].”³⁰ Thus, in Michaud’s view, the political dissidence described by Fei is not only a provocative challenge to Chinese “official” conventions, but represents an “awakening” China, a China that longs for the liberal freedoms of the West. As Michaud contends,

this movement [...] suggests a considerable change of attitude toward the political reality and from this point of view, without showing an excess of optimism, it is likely that the current Chinese regime won't be able to maintain its position indefinitely, nor maintain itself at all. The recent political changes in almost all countries have corresponded to changes, radical but simple, in beliefs and attitudes. Suddenly men who have tolerated a type of voluntary servitude no longer believe the lies they have been told daily, and are deserting and disobeying. These Chinese artists foreshadow what will eventually happen, hopefully even faster than I think (Michaud 1990b:25).³¹

While never stated explicitly, the Tiananmen Square incident appears in Michaud’s text as an emblem or sign of these shifting political values in China.

³⁰ From the French. My translation. “En tout état de cause, ce qui me frappe, c'est l'extrême diversité des orientations et la vitalité de cette création spécialiste....Dès qu'un minimum de jeu par rapport aux contraintes officielles devient possible, lorsqu'aussi l'information sur ce qui se passe ailleurs commence à circuler, des pratiques diverses se font jour qui s'opposent à l'asthénie, à l'absence d'imagination et au caractère inarticulé et pasteurisé de l'art officiel” (Michaud 1990b:24).

³¹ From the French. My translation. “Ce déplacement, d'autre part, suggère un changement considérable des attitudes par rapport à la réalité politique et de ce point de vue, sans faire preuve d'un excès d'optimisme, il est probable que le régime chinois actuel ne pourra pas se maintenir indéfiniment sur ses positions, ni même se maintenir tout court. Les changements politiques récents dans presque tous les pays ont correspondu à des changements, radicaux mais simples, de croyances et d'attitudes. Subitement des hommes qui toléraient jusque là une sorte de servitude volontaire n'ont plus accepté de croire les mensonges qu'on leur racontait à longueur de journée et se sont mis à désertier et à désobéir. Ces artistes chinois nous montrent à titre de préfiguration ce qui finira par arriver, je l'espère encore plus vite que je le pense” (Michaud 1990b:25).

The artists, in turn, are identified with this shift. In resisting “repression,” they are recognized as dissidents who affirm the universalization of Western liberal-democratic values.

Funded by the French government, *Chine demain pour hier*, like the *Tiananmen* commemorative exhibition, can also be understood as a politically dissident gesture directed at China. This time, however, the less censorious theme of cultural exchange and the exhibit’s distant location from Paris and the centre of French power soften the provocative gesture. Presented in such a provincial location, the exhibit garnered no reaction from the art press or from the Chinese government that I was able to find. Rather, its effect was more strongly felt at a local level where, as Michaud notes in his preface, the most surprising feature of the show was to find Chinese artists “where one does not expect” (1990a:9): in the midst of a small French village.

With its remote location and limited publicity, *Chine demain pour hier* was a small, and in many ways, insignificant exhibit in the larger scheme of how Chinese contemporary art came to be recognized internationally.³² Nevertheless, its curatorial approach, directed by Fei Dawei, followed a pattern of recognition that is replicated in the larger and better-publicized exhibits that appeared a few years later. Two of these exhibits, one in Berlin

³² *Chine demain pour hier* has been recognized as the first Chinese contemporary art exhibit outside of China after 1989 (Wu 2010:418; Gao 2005:375). The 98-page exhibit catalogue also represents the earliest collection of academic essays on the new art. The exhibit, however, has not been included in any in-depth studies of Chinese contemporary art that I could find. This may be attributed to the exhibit’s remote location, lack of wider publicity and critical response, and the fact that the catalogue, published only in French, is difficult to acquire.

and one in Hong Kong, opened almost simultaneously in 1993. *China Avant-Garde*, presented at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin, ran from January 29 to May 2, 1993. The hosting institution, HKW, is a public art museum that was established 10 years earlier for the promotion of international cultural exchanges. As Franziska Koch explains in her study of the German exhibit, its “overarching mission” was to “present the contemporary culture of foreign countries, mainly from the Third World, to the German public” (2011:111). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the institution became a centre for presenting art from the “nations that (formerly) belonged to the communist-governed world” (Koch 2011:111). *China Avant-Garde* was the institution’s first Chinese exhibit and the first exhibit of Chinese contemporary art in Germany.

The second exhibit, *China’s New Art, Post 1989* was held in Hong Kong from January 31 to February 25, 1993. The show was sponsored by a private gallery, Hanart TZ Gallery, founded and owned by co-curator of the exhibit, Chang Tsong-zung (Johnson Chang). The second curator was Li Xianting, one of the two key organizers of the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. The gallery had previously exhibited the work of the Stars and was one of the first galleries outside of China to begin marketing the new art. The show was also co-hosted by two government-funded organizations, the Hong Kong Arts Centre and the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society. Both *China Avant-Garde* and

China's New Art, Post 1989, in whole or part, travelled to other international venues, which then added to their later impact.³³

Like *Chine demain pour hier*, catalogues accompanied these two exhibits, this time published in English and other languages, which introduced Chinese contemporary art to a much-larger global audience (Noth, Pöhlmann and Reschke 1993; Chang and Li 1993). Like the *Chine demain pour hier* catalogue, the different texts introduce the historical development of Chinese contemporary art with essays by Chinese authors,³⁴ and then provide further affirmation by Euro-American experts. Michael Sullivan, for example, the noted British historian of Asian art, provided an essay for *China's New Art*, along with other lesser-known (at the time) contributors such as Francesca dal Lago, an Italian art historian who had studied at Central Academy of Art in Beijing in the 1980s, and Geremie Barmé, an Australian sinologist and writer who had lived in China. Western expertise for the Berlin exhibit was provided by the three Western curators, all of whom had extensive China experience: Dutch artist and designer Hans

³³ *China Avant-Garde* was presented at four other venues: Kunsthal Rotterdam in the Netherlands (May 29–July 15, 1993), the Museum of Contemporary Art, Oxford, England (July 31–October 17, 1993), Brandts Klædefabrik, Odense, Denmark (November 13, 1993–February 6, 1994), and Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum, Hildesheim, Germany (September 12–November 27, 1994). This latter exhibit was part of a China Arts Festival (Koch 2011:90). *China's New Art* travelled to Sydney, and some of the works were also shown as part of a Chinese exhibit at the 1993 Venice Biennale, as I discuss below (Chang and Li 1993).

³⁴ For example, “An Introduction to the History of Modern Chinese Art” by Li Xianting in the *China Avant-Garde* catalogue and “Modern Chinese Art – The Early Phase (1911 – 1949)” by Lang Shaojun and “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese art” by Li Xianting in the *China's New Art* catalogue.

van Dijk, who had lived in Beijing in the 1980s, where he was one of the first foreigners to document and promote Chinese avant-garde art; Andreas Schmid, a German artist who lived in Beijing, where he met members of the Stars and then studied in Hangzhou at the Zhejiang Academy; and Jochen Noth, a German communist who had moved to China in 1979 (Koch 2011:107-109). None of the Western experts involved in either exhibit had strong connections to the contemporary art field at the time. Rather, their strength lay in their knowledge of and association with Chinese art and artists in the 1980s – something that no curators in the contemporary field could claim, as Yves Michaud’s admission demonstrates. Chinese contemporary art was a new genre in 1993 and it also came from a different political and cultural territory. Just as Jean-Hubert Martin had recognized when selecting non-Western artists for *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989, the authentic recommendation of Chinese and Westerners who had experienced the new art *in situ* was invaluable.

Like Fei Dawei, the curators of these 1993 shows were primarily concerned with introducing Chinese contemporary art, demonstrating its contemporaneity and the artists’ commitment, and distinguishing the singular difference of the genre. As before, the difference of the new art is found in its merging of Western practices with distinct Chinese features and its perceived dissident relation to the policies and regulations of the Chinese government. The Tiananmen Square incident appears, once again, as a kind of spectral presence that serves to confirm the dissident identity of Chinese

artists. The two exhibits, however, use different strategies to negotiate this presence – differences likely derived from the fact that the exhibits were presented in two very different geographical and national territories.

Geographically closer to China, the Hong Kong exhibit, *China's New Art, Post 1989* very openly emphasized the significance of Tiananmen Square incident. The incident is suggested by the date 1989 in the title and by references to the name of the Square and/or the date June 4 cited in over half the essays.³⁵ With the official 1997 handover only a few years away, Hong Kong likely did not have to fear the same diplomatic and trade repercussions for addressing the sensitive topic as European nations.³⁶ Still, all of the references to the Tiananmen Square incident avoid censorious condemnation or making pronouncements on the political future of China as Michaud did in his essay. Rather the essays relate the event to artistic production in China. As Chang explains in his introductory essay, the exhibit was designed to focus on new Chinese art “with the view to elucidate the various artistic undercurrents and general cultural sensibilities that distinguished the 1990s in China” (1993:I). Most of Chang’s essay is devoted to outlining the different artistic trends that emerge post-1989. All of these

³⁵ Here I include essays written by Chang Tsong-zung, Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, Li Xianting, Michael Sullivan, Nicholas Jose, Geremie Barmé, Jeffrey Hantover, and Liao Wen.

³⁶ Hong Kong was in a very different political situation than European nations, as diplomatic relations were negotiated between the United Kingdom and China. As Eberhart Sandschneider notes, “political ties between the United Kingdom and China were largely influenced by the debate about Hong Kong and the return of sovereignty of the last British crown colony to China” (2002:35).

trends are describe in relation to the Tiananmen Square incident and another important event in 1989, the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit. As the first official exhibit of Chinese contemporary art in China, *China/Avant-Garde* is presented as a benchmark for contemporary art in China. The Tiananmen Square incident is then a pivotal and transformative moment that shifts the artistic development established by *China/Avant-Garde*. As Chang explains “since 1989, new art in China has gone through a significant transformation” (I);

after Tian’anmen, all ‘unofficial’ culture – painting, writing, music-making, the whole lot – was again pushed to the periphery. In shock, the artists came to a sudden realization of their impotence in the face of real politics. The idealism and utopian enthusiasm so typical of new art in the 1980s met its nemesis in the gun barrels of Tian’anmen. ‘Unofficial’ culture, which was just coming out into the open, was again forced into an iconoclast position by official policy (I).

As other curators have argued, the '85 Movement artists initiated a challenge to official policy by producing new forms of art. Their art was politically dissident and opened the way for younger artists to explore new media and genre. Thus, as Chang points out, the Tiananmen Square incident and the repression that followed “ironically” “served creative art a good turn” (I); it inspired a new creative movement by giving the artists new limits to react against. As Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, the Director of Exhibitions for the Hong Kong Arts Centre, writes in his essay,

the new art created after 1989 actually accumulates and digests the years of new experience brought about by economic reform and political change [the years prior to 1989]. The difference is that after going through a devastating experience, the artists express themselves more powerfully and vividly (VIII).

The exhibit *China/Avant-Garde* then affirmed the political and artistic commitment of the earlier generation of artists. It provided an important foundation for justifying the dissident value of the new art of the 1990s while the Tiananmen Square incident is the catalyst that moved Chinese contemporary art from the utopian hopes of the '85 Movement toward the cynical and ironic practices of the 1990s (Li 1993).

The *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit also played a significant role in the mediation of the German exhibit. The Tiananmen Square incident, on the other hand, remained largely in the background. As Koch notes, the title of the Berlin exhibit, *China Avant-Garde*, “referred both literally and substantively to the English subtitle of the *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan* [*China/Avant-Garde*]” (2011:90). Over half the artists included in the Berlin show had participated in the 1989 exhibit (Koch 2011:90). By making a direct connection between the two shows, one in China and one in Berlin, the curators acknowledged the important accomplishment of *China/Avant-Garde*. As Koch notes, the Berlin exhibit and the other Chinese-themed exhibits after 1989 “enhanced the international recognition” of *China/Avant-Garde* “by describing it as a seminal event” (91).³⁷ At the same time, the curators of the Berlin exhibit were concerned that European audiences would associate the references to 1989 “with the negative image of the People’s Republic depicted in European media reports of the violent

³⁷ *China/Avant-Garde* was also recognized by *Chine demain pour hier*, which avoided referring to the avant-garde in its title, but featured a drawing of the no U-turn sign from the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibit on the catalogue cover.

repression of mass protests on Tiananmen Square” (2011:101). The sensitivity to the political events in China was especially strong in Germany. Germany had only recently begun its reunification of East and West Germany and, like other European nations, had recently reestablished diplomatic relations with China (Sandschneider 2002:38; Koch 2011:101-02).³⁸ As Koch reports,

Schmid and Noth expected to encounter difficulties not only from the official Chinese side, but also sought to caution potential collaborating art institutions not to jeopardize the undertaking within Germany, where “direct political confrontation with the Chinese regime would possibly discourage sponsors and cause pressure from German authorities” (Koch 2011:103).

The curators were also concerned that any association with 1989 and what this meant politically in Germany and beyond might detract from their primary aim: to promote the artistic value of Chinese contemporary art. Again, as Koch relates, the curators did not want the exhibition to be

equated with Chinese political dissidents: a simplistic ideological interpretation that they wanted to avoid because it was likely to obscure the inherently art-related and increasingly autonomous stance that had marked the artistic production of the last decade in China (102).

Thus, in 1991 Noth proposed that “any kind of political connotation, for instance in the sense of ‘dissident art,’ should be avoided” (102), as the aim of the exhibit was to “document artistic, not outspokenly political qualities” (102). Still, like the curators of the exhibits already discussed, the Berlin curators recognized Chinese contemporary art as a resistance to and

³⁸ Germany reestablished diplomatic relations with China in 1990 and, in keeping with its “One China” policy, it accepted China’s request to discontinue arms sales to Taiwan in 1993 (Sandschneider 2002:38).

“detachment from” the regulating conventions of the Chinese artistic field.

As Noth outlined in the original German introduction to the catalogue, the objective of the exhibit was

“to show artworks of contemporary artists of the PRC, who partly live in exile, partly in China” and share the common characteristic “that they work with forms of expression and motifs in their artworks [that are] *independent* of the official Chinese art doctrine and have *detached themselves from conventions and traditions* to such an extent that they have arrived at an *individually* expressive [art] language” (Koch 2011:112-13).

The emphases are added by Koch to stress the criteria the curators used for selecting “avant-garde” artists for the exhibit. Once again, “avant-garde,” in the Chinese context, was equated with artists who distinguished their difference (their “individuality”) against the official and regularized artistic practices in China. As Koch contends, it was these selection criteria that then “determined – at least in Europe – what kind of art and which artists would be considered part of Chinese vanguard art after 1993” (2011:113).

All four Chinese-themed exhibits, in France, Hong Kong, and Germany, represent the first accreditation of Chinese contemporary art in the West. Each exhibit followed a different strategy reflective of its location and the political circumstances governing its relations with China at the time. Within this context, each exhibit presented Chinese art and artists as politically dissident – opposed to China’s official regulation and supportive of liberal-democratic values. Presented without sponsorship or even tacit support of the Chinese government, the artists and artwork were even further “detached” from the official art and political policies in China. Moreover, in

the case of France and Germany, a cultural exchange exhibit without the participation of China represents a strong political gesture even if the curators intended to emphasize the artistic value of the work. The political dimension of these exhibits then ensured that Chinese contemporary artists and artwork were accredited and valued not only for how they artistically challenged Western practices but also for how they challenged China and reinforced the liberal-democratic values of the West.

The Venice Biennale, unlike national territories such as France, Hong Kong, and Germany, represents a global territory where artistic and Western liberal-democratic values are intimately related. Founded in 1895, the Venice Biennale is the oldest and most important international exhibition of contemporary art. The Biennale is held in the summer months every two years and consists of nationally sponsored exhibits of contemporary art. Each country presents its selected artwork in a “pavilion,” a space that represents its national territory within the larger global space of the Biennale.³⁹ Attended by the most important art-world curators, collectors, and critics, the Biennale is also one of the most important events for the accreditation of contemporary art. The art world response to Chinese art within this highly political and international territory is then significant.

³⁹ The Biennale is centred in the Giardini, a large public park on the island of Venice. The park houses a central pavilion and 29 national pavilions, mostly occupied by Euro-American nations. As the event expanded, more permanent and temporary pavilions were added in the Arsenale, a nearby historic shipyard that has been renovated into an expansive cultural district.

The Venice Biennale's relationship to liberal-democratic values is founded in its original purpose. Italy initiated the Biennale in 1895 as a way to demonstrate its commitment to the democratic values of the pan-European community and its new modern nationhood (West 1995). Modern art was always an important part of this political project (West 1995). Known for its ancient Roman ruins and Renaissance art, Italy wanted to be recognized as a modern nation. Thus, as Shearer West points out, "the Biennale regulations made its devotion to modernism clear" (1995:413), and participating nations were encouraged to express their modernity through their most contemporary art. As a result, the Biennale has come to represent a space where a nation's relationship to Western liberal-democratic values is expressed not only through participation in the event but also in the type of art presented within this international space (Balfe 1987; Rylands and di Martino 1993; Jachec 2005).

The first Biennale after World War II in 1948 solidified the relationship between modern art and liberal-democratic values. This edition of the Biennale celebrated the triumph of democracy over fascism by promoting avant-garde art as a dissident difference to the "official" art of fascist and communist nations. For example, at this first Biennale after the defeat of Germany an exhibit of "degenerate art" (avant-garde art banned by the German National Socialists) was presented in the German pavilion. It was also at this Biennale that the Americans, recently triumphant in World War II, emphasized their modernity by introducing their young Abstract

Expressionists. American art collector and gallerist Peggy Guggenheim also featured her collection of European modernists, including work by the “degenerate” Expressionists, Surrealists, and Dadaists (Rylands and di Martino 1993:88-91). In the following years, abstraction and other avant-garde work dominated the Biennale and became emblematic of the West’s liberal democracy (Egbert 1967:362-362; Balfe 1987). As the Biennale’s general secretary, Rodolfo Pallucchini stated, avant-garde art “was an indicator of the ‘new climate of liberty, hard won of the European spirit’” (Jachec 2005:204).

After 1948, avant-garde art was also taken up as a way to challenge nations that did not conform to Europe’s liberal-democratic principles. For example, in 1974, a special edition of the Biennale entitled “Liberty for Chile” was dedicated to opposing the Pinochet government (Rylands and di Martino 1993:179). Posters and contemporary artworks were spread throughout Venice as a symbol of the liberty that the people of Chile were demanding. A few years later, in 1977, an exhibit of “unofficial” avant-garde art from the USSR entitled *New Soviet Art: An Unofficial View* was presented as a counter to the Soviet socialist realist art presented in the Russian pavilion (Rylands and di Martino 1993:183; Balfe 1987:18[208]).

China’s introduction into the very political space of the Venice Biennale began in the early 1980s. In 1980, and again in 1982, China sent its first exhibits to the Biennale. In keeping with its ideal of a national art form, China sent exhibits of “traditional embroideries and paper-cuts” (Wang

2009:102) – an indication that Chinese officials did not understand, or chose to ignore, the contemporary aesthetics of the event. China returned to the Biennale in 1997, but once again presented a sharp contrast by featuring an exhibit of academic oil paintings (Wang 2009:102). It was not until 2003 that China prepared its first official exhibit of contemporary art for the Venice Biennale.⁴⁰ Unlike the previous exhibits, organized by a committee of government officials, the 2003 pavilion was planned by three designated art professionals (Wang 2009:104). This time the exhibit consisted of installation and video work by five young artists and demonstrated a better understanding of the artistic requirements of the Biennale (Wang 2009:105).⁴¹ The exhibit, however, never made it to Venice. Due to the outbreak of SARS that year, the government cancelled all plans to send the art or the artists to Venice.⁴² It was not until 2005 that China finally succeeded in opening a contemporary exhibit in Venice and, beginning in 2011, China claimed its own permanent national pavilion in the Arsenale.

⁴⁰ China made its participation in the 2003 Biennale contingent on Taiwan losing its national status. Taiwan had hosted a nation pavilion since 1995 (Wei 2013:475). In 2003, at China's request, the Biennale rescinded Taiwan's national status. Taiwan was still allowed to exhibit but was shunted to the Biennale periphery along with a number of other contested "nation-states" such as Wales and Hong Kong (Wei 2013:480).

⁴¹ As Meiqin Wang points out, the exhibit avoided the usual "positive and grand narratives" (2009:111) typical of socialist realist exhibits, and appeared very "contemporary" in that it successfully "conveyed the themes of uncertainty, alienation, and fragmentation" of modern life in China (2009:110).

⁴² The exhibit was mounted at the Guangdong Museum of Art from July 25 to August 31, 2003, where it met with an enthusiastic response from the artistic community in China (Wang 2009).

During China's absence from the Biennale, Chinese contemporary art was presented "unofficially" in every Biennale beginning in 1993. The 1993 and 1999 Biennales were especially notable in that they both presented a large number of Chinese artists. In 1993, 14 Chinese artists were featured in an exhibit entitled *Nuova pittura cinese (New Chinese Painting)*,⁴³ which formed part of a larger exhibit entitled *Passaggio a Oriente (Passage to the East)*. Curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, the director of that year's Biennale, with the assistance of Li Xianting and Francesca dal Lago, the exhibit was a much smaller version of the Hong Kong exhibit, *China's New Art, Post-1989*. *Passaggio a Oriente* was meant to represent the cultural exchange between East and West, and thus fit into the overall Biennale theme set by Oliva: to open the boundaries of the art world to all four cardinal points of the globe.⁴⁴ The Chinese exhibit within the larger exhibit consisted wholly of painting, except for an installation piece by Xu Bing.⁴⁵ According to Wang Lin in an article published in 1993 in the Chinese journal *Dushu*, Oliva traveled to China to view the work and, against the advice of Li and dal Lago, "selected the things that interested him: Political Pop and Cynical Realism" (Wang Lin

⁴³ Two works by Chen Zhen were also featured at the Biennale as part of a large international exhibit, *Trésors de voyage*, curated by Adelina von Fürstenberg.

⁴⁴ *Passaggio a Oriente* was an odd mix of exhibits. Along with *Nuova pittura cinese* the exhibit included the Japanese Gutai and the French Letterist groups (both of which began producing work in the 1950s), an exhibit of contemporary Russian art, and exhibits of work by Yoko Ono and Shigeo Kubota (La biennale di Venezia 1993; Oliva and Kontova 1993).

⁴⁵ The artists included Ding Yi, Fang Lijun, Feng Mengbo, Geng Jianyi, Li Shan, Liu Wei, Song Haidong, Sun Liang, Wang Guangyi, Wang Ziwei, Xu Bing, Yu Hong, Yu Youhan, and Zhang Peili.

[1993] 2010:366). Rather than stir an interest in Chinese contemporary art, positive or negative, *Nuova pittura cinese* appears to have been ignored by all the significant critics, who almost universally panned the 1993 Biennale and Oliva's *Aperto* exhibit.⁴⁶

In contrast, a more welcoming and enthusiastic critical response followed the presentation of "unofficial" Chinese artists at the 1999 Venice Biennale.⁴⁷ Twenty artists, including Chen Zhen and Wang Du from this study, were included in the *Aperto* exhibit, this time curated by Harald Szeemann.⁴⁸ Entitled *d'Apertutto* (roughly meaning "open to all"), the exhibit included 111 international artists. The thematic program for the Biennale was much the same as the one set by Oliva in 1993: to open the Biennale to the whole world and break from the traditional representation of nation states. To this end, Szeemann encouraged nations to exhibit artists from other nations within their national pavilions, as France appears to have done by introducing Huang Yong Ping. As Biennale director, Szeemann demonstrated this objective by filling the Italian pavilion, a space usually

⁴⁶ *Aperto* is a large group exhibit meant to showcase the work of young international artists under forty. Oliva and Harald Szeemann founded the show as a regular Biennale feature in 1980. Oliva was the primary curator of *Aperto* for the 1993 Biennale. He recruited numerous curators and consultants and the exhibit consisted of a number of individual exhibitions and shows within shows such as *Passaggio a Oriente* and *Nuova pittura cinese*.

⁴⁷ Unofficial artists also participated in the 1995 and 1997 Biennales. They were fewer in number and not presented as a national group. As noted above, China sent an "official" exhibit of academic painting in 1997.

⁴⁸ In 1999, at the age of 66, Szeemann was considered the guru of independent curators. He established his reputation in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Vetrocq 1999:83). By 1999, his nomination of any artist had an incredible consecrating power.

reserved for Italians, with the bulk of *d'Apertutto*. Chinese artists were by far the largest recognized group within the show and even the Biennale as a whole (dal Lago 1999; Wu 2010:356).⁴⁹ As Katy Siegel in *Artforum* commented, the Biennale appeared as “the wholesale co-option of Chinese artists, who have apparently been granted most-favored-nation status, supplanting the Brits and the Japanese” (1999:149). The headline of Harry Bellet’s review in *Le Monde* read “A massive and stimulating Chinese presence” (1999b).⁵⁰ Bellet gave a glowing review of the Chinese work in *d'Apertutto*, citing Cai Guo-Qiang, Chen Zhen, Zhao Bandi, and Wang Du for their critical take on both China and the West (Bellet 1999b). Adding to these critical accolades, the Italian pavilion was awarded the prize for the best national pavilion (out of 59 contenders), and Cai Guo-Qiang and two other artists within the exhibit won the top awards for individual artists. After the 1999 Biennale, Chinese artists had definitely earned their place in the contemporary field of art.

There are at least three factors that likely contributed to the different responses to the two Biennales. First, in 1993, Chinese contemporary art was new to the contemporary art world. The first Chinese-themed exhibits, as discussed above, were relatively peripheral to the artistic field in Paris,

⁴⁹ Artists included Qui Shihua, Liang Shaoji, Chen Zhen, Wang Du, Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-qiang, Zhang Peili, Wang Jin, Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Yang Shaobin, Ying-Bo, Zhao Bandi, Zhuang Hui, Zhang Huan, Zhou Tiehai, Lu Hao, Ma Liuming, Wang Xingwei, and Xie Nanxing.

⁵⁰ From the French. My translation. “Une présence chinoise massive et stimulante” (Bellet 1999b).

New York, or London, and the curators and academics involved did not, for the most part, have close associations with the centre of the contemporary field. In 1993, the field was also still adjusting to the new value of identity art initiated by *Magiciens de la Terre*. Thomas McEvilley suggests as much in his review of the 1993 Biennale. McEvilley writes a defense of Oliva's curatorial objectives and argues, "coming as it does after the assault on the Whitney Biennial, the reception of the Venice show suggests a deeply threatened feeling" (1993:102). The Whitney Biennial had opened in New York only a few months before, and was criticized for its very political emphasis on the disenfranchised Other in American society (Smith 1993). McEvilley contends that the most important feature of the 1993 Venice Biennale is that it questioned "certain limited ideas of artistic and cultural quality" (1993:102). In 1993, Chinese contemporary art was introduced into this disputed artistic territory where the recognition of "quality" takes time.

Second, considering the shifting artistic requirements in the early 1990s, the selection of work for the exhibits was especially important. The majority of work in the 1993 Biennale was figurative easel painting, a genre that had already been strongly contested in the 1980s as conceptual, installation, and video works moved to the fore. Jean-Hubert Martin recognized this fact when he selected the work for *Magiciens* in 1989. As he noted in our interview, so much Chinese art in the 1980s was painting, and he was looking for something quite different. The critics of the 1993 exhibit also appear to have recognized the ineffectual artistic gesture of Political Pop

painting, something they expressed in their silence rather than in any specific comment. Giorgio Verzotti, for example, writing for *Artforum*, does not even mention *Passaggio* or the Chinese artists in his review of *Aperto '93*. Instead, he commented on more current and controversial artists, such as Damien Hirst and Kiki Smith who both produce sculptural work (1993:104-05). Writing for *Art in America*, Marcia Vetrocq claimed that *Passaggio* was a “shapeless array of sensibilities” and only the Gutai – a 1950s Japanese group that created paintings through performance – “emerges with the greatest relief and range” (1993:105). *Nuova pittura cinese* was then, again, confronted with issues of quality and the shifting tastes of the artistic field.

Third, within the international territory of the Biennale, presenting the artists as a group under a title that emphasized their Chinese nationality focused attention on the political rather than artistic dimension of the work, especially with China’s official absence from the Biennale. China was also absent from the 1999 Biennale, but Szeemann avoided the suggestion of an overt national representation by interspersing the Chinese artists within a larger international exhibit that did not focus on the artists’ Chinese identity. This was a strategy also employed by the curators of *Magiciens de la Terre* when they included Chinese artists. Szeemann, it seems, realized that a group presentation would not be to his or the artists’ advantage. Steven Madoff notes that in an interview with Szeemann, the curator explained that

to do a show of the Chinese alone, for example – I would be accused of exotica. But here, among so many artists, I thought there was a chance. And the Chinese have ideas, internal cultural histories, buried strategies we have no idea of (1999:184).

By choosing artists working in a variety of contemporary media and mixing them in with their Western contemporaries, Szeemann asserted their artistic equality rather than their political affiliation.

The one review of the 1993 Venice Biennale that directly considers *Nuova pittura cinese* also raises the issue of quality and national representation. Written by Hou Hanru, the review was published in *Third Text*, a post-colonial art journal. The review questions the quality of the exhibit in its critical assessment of the Biennale as a whole and of Oliva's objective to reflect an East-West artistic exchange in *Passaggio a Oriente*. Hou argues that the Post-89 Political Pop painting selected by Oliva misrepresented the aims of the artists, who were never concerned with exploring Western artistic practices. Rather, as Hou explains, Political Pop was a response to "the disappointments among a young generation after the '89 event of Tienan Men Square [sic] and cynical reactions to the economic boom during the last two years" (98). The focus of the artists, Hou writes, is on "their social situation and the conflicts between a desire for personal freedom or satisfaction and their social-political reality" (1993:97-98). In other words, he claims their interest lies in responding to their own political and social circumstance rather than in exploring Western ideas and practices. By focusing on Post-89 Political Pop as the co-option of Western practices, Hou contends that Oliva "ignor[ed] or overlook[ed] other tendencies which are actually more serious in exploring the question of East-

West dialogues in art” (98).⁵¹ Hou concludes that Oliva’s selection only panders to “the new-born market” for Chinese art and represents “a continuation of the Cold-War ideological exoticism” (1993:98). Ironically, Hou’s critique of Western-centric assumptions about Chinese contemporary art only reinforce the idea that in their search for “personal freedom” Chinese artists contribute to, rather than detract from, the attribution of political dissidence. Grouped together under the defining title “Chinese,” *Nuova pittura cinese* appeared then to be a national representation that, despite Hou’s ambiguous critique, strongly emphasized the politically dissident capacity of Chinese contemporary art.

The dissident value of Chinese contemporary art was again emphasized in the reaction to the 1999 Venice Biennale. This time, the mediating power of the artistic field clearly recognized the politically dissident attributes of Chinese art and artists as valuable artistic assets. At the 1999 Biennale, Chinese artists were recognized as a refreshing and original addition to the usual Western art stars. As Madoff relates, Barbara Thumm, a Berlin art dealer, commented that the Biennale on the whole

⁵¹ Hou does not elaborate on what the “tendencies” are that Oliva “overlooked.” In 1993, Hou was just beginning his curatorial career after moving to France in 1990 to assist Fei Dawei with *Chine demain pour hier*. He had just completed his study at the Prato art program where he would have learned much about the expectations of the contemporary field. And, in 1994, he wrote his essay on New Internationalism where he emphasized the importance of expatriate artists such as Huang Yong Ping, who bring together a Chinese sensibility with Western conceptual practices (Hou 1994). Ten years later, in 2003, Hou curated *Zones of Urgency*, an exhibit of Asia Pacific art for the 50th Venice Biennale. He included work by Yang Jiechang, Yan Pei-Ming, and Huang Yong Ping.

presented “what we know, so surprises are not easy. But the Chinese work is very interesting and most of us are new to it” (1999:154). This newness and originality was founded not only on the artist’s ability to work with Western practices and media, but also on the recognition of the artist’s dissident relationship with the Chinese government. As Madoff notes, the Chinese artworks “are interesting above all for their political purview” (154), a comment that indicates that even without being presented in a nationally-designated exhibit, the Chinese artists were still categorized in relation to the PRC. Furthermore, this political difference distinguished the artists *artistically* from their European and American peers, where, Madoff claims, “politics is barely present as a subject” (154). The Chinese artists, he asserts, “employ the usual tools: video, photography, drawing, sculpture, painting. But what they live is a life still bound by government constraint. From this comes a visceral exuberance, a carbohic bite to their sardonic art” (154, 184). Again, such comments indicate the assumption made about China and Chinese artists when Chinese art has been presented in the West. Regardless of place of residence – for example, Cai Guo-Qiang, Huang Yong Ping, Wang Du, and Chen Zhen all lived outside of China at the time – any artist recognized as originating from China are grouped together as one, and often associated with political dissidence in China.

In making his selection for the 1999 Biennale, Harald Szeemann was not unaware of the subversive power that had been ascribed to Chinese art. His selection of Cai Guo-Qiang’s award-winning *Venice Rent Collection*

Courtyard is a good example. Cai's work was the largest and most politically-provocative Chinese work at Venice that year. This ambitious sculptural installation consisted of a reproduction of *The Rent Collection Courtyard*, a sculptural group that was produced at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 1965. The original incorporated found objects along with over 100 life-size figures. The different figural groups within the overall work illustrated the suffering of peasants under the oppressive control of Chinese landlords before the Communist Revolution. In China, the work was "acclaimed a model sculpture" (Erickson 2010:368-369) and copied and exhibited throughout the nation during the Cultural Revolution. Cai presented his 1999 version as both a sculptural tableau and a performance piece. In a large open space in the Arsenal, Chinese sculptors worked on reconstructing 100 sculptures in clay. Over the course of the Biennale, the work was produced and then left to slowly crumble as the clay dried and fell off the armatures (Erickson 1999). As David Elliott wrote in *Artforum*, Cai's *Rent Collection* "confronted history, both personal and grand" and its "dislocation of place and time highlighted disparities between ideology and feeling, art and politics, past and present" (1999:150). In an article for *Chinese-art.com*, Britta Erickson was more explicit about the Chinese historical-political context evoked by the work. Cai's rendition of *Rent Collection*, Erickson noted, could "be read on many levels, pointing to the futility of individual effort [...] as well as to the ultimate failure of China's movement to create an ideal Socialist state" (1999).

Neither Cai Guo-Qiang nor Huang Yong Ping claim to be dissidents, nor did their individual artworks at the 1999 Biennale represent an overt statement for or against Chinese political policy. Still their work was mediated according to the difference their Chinese identities signified especially in the very political territory of the Biennale. Situated in a national pavilion, it was the cultural difference represented in Huang's work that appeared to intrude upon France's national representation and challenged French artistic and cultural values. Cai Guo-Qiang's work, on the other hand, placed within an international rather than national space and depicting a Chinese political subject, was understood in relation to how it appeared to challenge Beijing. As one of 20 Chinese artists in Szeemann's selection for *d'Apertutto*, Cai was, by default, considered to be part of a very powerful and "unofficial" Chinese contingent despite Szeemann's efforts to avoid a group representation. As Catherine Millet's comments indicate in reference to France choosing a Chinese artist for their pavilion, Chinese artists by 1999 (10 years after the Tiananmen Square incident) had gained both artistic and political value. With no "official" national representation at the Biennale, the "unofficial" Chinese artists then appeared as dissidents or exiles that, through their participation outside of an official national pavilion, desired and thus valorized the liberal-democratic values of the West.

A few years after the Biennale, Harold Szeemann provided the most succinct explanation for the powerful combination of artistic and political values that had been attributed to Chinese artists by 1999 – an explanation

that linked contrasting transnational political sites with the art world's demand for artistic singularity. In response to the question of why he had invited so many Chinese artists to take part in *d'Apertutto*, Szeemann responded:

in the west, especially New York and Paris, everything had become boring and uncreative....since the last revolution of the arts in the sixties, there has been no subversive art; good artists, yes, but the subcutaneous rebelliousness has disappeared in the west, and that explains my interest in China. Whether work is traditionally painted or sculpted, whether painting is undermined by rolling picture scrolls or by videos, subversiveness is always part of the message. This may be explained by the context: artists who stay in the country want to change things and want to gain freedom of action (Szeemann 2002:006).

For Szeemann, then, Chinese artists emerge from a "context" or territory where "freedom" is denied – something that no Western artist living in a liberal democracy can replicate. By taking up the subversive and dissident practices of contemporary art, the Chinese artist is understood to be expressing his desire for "freedom" within this context. The combination of repression and resistance within China is then significant. But, as Szeemann also adds, Chinese art requires the "recognition from outside, from the west" (2002:006) for its subversive value to be activated within the artistic field. Understood according to Heinrich's model of the three-hand game of contemporary art, Chinese artists take up Western art practices as a way to challenge the artistic regulation in China, the Chinese state plays the second hand by providing the negative reaction and refusal, while Western art institutions, agents, and governments provide the necessary mediation that transforms the artists' subversive gestures into artistic value. It is this

“subcutaneous rebelliousness” born from the socio-political situation in China but presented and mediated from within the territory of the liberal-democratic West that produces the singular difference of the Chinese artist as dissident.

Conclusion

The Value of Dissidence

I began this project with a curiosity about what makes Chinese contemporary art so significant in the West. I explored this by interrogating the common trope of the “Chinese artist as dissident.” Three questions guided my inquiry: What role does dissidence, artistic or political, play in the recognition of Chinese artists? What role does dissidence play in how contemporary art, Chinese or otherwise, is recognized and valued? And, what is the significance of dissidence as an artistic expression? I have explored these questions by considering the artistic transition and transformation of the Chinese artists in this study as they have moved from China to France. Drawing on Nathalie Heinich’s theory of “singularity” in contemporary art ([1991] 1996; 2005), I considered how the valorization of difference and dissidence might be understood as artistic singularity and originality. In Heinich’s theory, artists are recognized and valorized for the singular difference they introduce in the field. In this study, I have proposed that such differences may be understood as dissidence. Dissidence, as difference and disagreement, is a dissensus with the community consensus – that is, with the normative beliefs, values, and conventions of a given social field. As such, dissidence initiates a contrast between what is normal and abnormal, conventional and out-of-the-ordinary. Dissidence may be expressed artistically and/or politically. An artist, for example, may initiate a

dissident challenge to the formal or aesthetic conventions of artistic production. This might include introducing new media, conceptual approaches, or different uses for traditional material. Artistic challenges question the aesthetic conventions and requirements of the field. At the same time, such challenges are politically dissident in that they initiate a disagreement over the common consensus of what is and is not art. As Heinich proposes, an artist may also be recognized for expressing an overt disagreement with social or political values. This might be demonstrated in the subject of the artwork or in the artist's actions and words. Recognized and mediated by the agents and institutions of the artistic field, dissident expressions are then transformed into artistic value. Once valorized, dissidence is recognized as a singular difference that distinguishes one artist from another, and defines each artist's original and unique contribution to the field.

The Chinese émigré artists in this study have provided a rich sample for examining the specificities of Heinich's insights about artistic singularity and how singularity might be understood as the valorization of dissidence – artistic and political. Chinese artists first distinguished their artistic difference by taking up Western art practices in China at a time when such new approaches were considered radical and provocative. Even if individual artists did not intend these artistic gestures to be politically dissident, their individual and group efforts initiated a strong dissensus with the regulated artistic conventions authorized by the CCP and the China Artists Association.

Migrating to France in and around 1989, the artists entered a different social field, one where their artistic production and their identities were contrasted to a different set of artistic, cultural, and political values. Thus, Chinese art and artists were often recognized for their cultural difference – seemingly manifested in their identities as much as their integration of Chinese cultural images, material, and ideas in their artwork. The alterity of this difference was then recognized and valorized as a dissident gesture that challenges and transforms the dominant cultural paradigm in the West (McEvelley 1992; Hou 1994; Mosquera [1992] 2005; Murray and Murray 2005). At the same time, Chinese artists were recognized for how their artistic practice in China appeared to present a provocative challenge to the regulated artistic and social fields in China. It was the “subcutaneous rebelliousness” (Szeemann 2002:006) of this gesture within the context of the Chinese socio-political situation that was valorized in the West as singularly distinctive and dissident – a gesture that at once challenged the Chinese state and affirmed the value of free expression in the West. The dissident differences of Chinese contemporary art – artistic, cultural, and political – were then enhanced by the Western reaction to the Tiananmen Square incident. The Tiananmen Square incident focused attention on China and highlighted the political differences between an authoritarian China and a liberal-democratic West. Presented in the West – a geo-political territory that values dissidence as a measure of its own freedom – the apparent dissident rebelliousness of Chinese artists was then valorized as an affirmation of liberal-democratic

principles. As a result, Chinese art and artists have been recognized for an unusual and contradictory combination of artistic and political dissidences, a combination that differentiates them from Western art and artists and distinguishes Chinese contemporary art as a specific genre.

Following Bourdieu's framework for understanding the cultural field, this study of Chinese contemporary art indicates how the recognition and valorization of dissidence is an integrative process. Artists (Chinese or otherwise) cannot claim their own value but must be recognized and mediated by the agents and institutions that regulate the field. The transformative process combines the artist's accumulation of different forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic), the artist's ability to respond to the demands of the field, and the recognition and valorization of the artist and art by the institutions and agents in the field (Bourdieu 1993; 1996). In other words, dissidence only attains artistic value through the confluence of the lived experience of the artist, the production of the work, and the specific demands and expectations of the field at a particular time.

The recognition of the artists in this study exemplifies the significance of these different relationships in establishing the recognition of Chinese contemporary art. Crossing between China and the West, the artists had to acquire suitable capital to support their artistic endeavours and to gain visibility in a field where they were largely unknown. Arriving in France, they acquired important social capital in the form of relationships with curators and institutions. The artists also had to produce work that met with

the artistic expectations of the Western contemporary art field. As Heinrich's studies show, the dissident value of art is recognized as much by the "obligatory transgression" (1998a:339) of the work as it is by the work's convincing congruity with the historical and current precedents in the field. Arriving in the West, the artists had to learn and understand a new artistic field, one that was, in the late 1980s, undergoing a significant change. *Magiciens de la Terre* was an integral part of this change, preparing the way for a more plural and inclusive artistic field that could begin to recognize and valorize the identity difference of artists from outside of the West. The Chinese artist's identity, and its purported difference from Western identity, is then a significant contributing factor that distinguished the artistic and political dissidence attributed to Chinese artists. The dissident capacity of Chinese contemporary art is, then, produced at the juncture of these different social and artistic forces that the artists encountered upon entering the field. As Bourdieu explains in relation to specific social fields such as the artistic field, "people are at once founded and legitimized to enter the field by their possessing a definite configuration of properties" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:107). The artistic field, however, also demands difference. The challenge for any artist, Chinese or otherwise, is how to express this difference within a configuration of sameness.

The transition of Chinese contemporary art and artists in this study also exemplifies the transnational production of artistic value as artists and their work move across socio-political boundaries. This transition

demonstrates that the dissident value of art is not a singular unique form, but one that takes different shapes at different times, and within different socio-political territories. The dissident practices of artists in China in the 1980s, for example, presented a challenging contrast to the regulated field in China but did not initially affect a dissident contrast – artistic or political – in the Western artistic field. Identified by important curators like Jean-Hubert Martin and presented in Western cultural centres, Chinese contemporary art was then transformed. Featured in an exhibit where identity was valorized Chinese artists were noted as different and dissident. At the same time, the Chinese artist's identity difference was considered in relation to the political values in France in 1989. For example, the bicentennial celebration in France and the Tiananmen Square incident reproduced the values of a Western liberal-democratic consensus that imagines China and Chinese citizens in a particular way. These views of national and political difference were then reflected in the mediating discourses that supported the artists' recognition as Chinese, contemporary, and dissident.

The transnational transformation of Chinese art and artists thus highlights the intimate relationship between the Western artistic field and liberal democracy. Located in Western cultural centres, the international contemporary art field is part of a larger social field that is shaped by liberal-democratic values. These values support such humanitarian ideals as freedom of expression and universal human rights. It is also a social field where, like the artistic field, dissidence is valued. Within this socio-political

territory, Chinese contemporary art, like all contemporary art, continually enacts a transgressive and dissident challenge to artistic and social values. Within the context of a liberal democracy, this form of dissidence can be understood as an act of free expression. Both the artistic field and the larger democratic consensus condone and encourage such expression. The dissident value of Chinese contemporary art then rests on the valorization of several contrasts: a contrast of artistic practice where Chinese art introduces new ideas, media, and images; a contrast between perceptions of Chinese cultural difference in relation to the dominant cultural practices in the West; and, a contrast between Beijing's authoritarian rule and Western liberal-democratic values. As a result, the validation of Chinese art and artists is always implicated in the political tensions between these differing artistic and political systems. Thus, even if a Chinese artist does not claim to be a dissident or an exile, his Chinese identity is invested with the symbolic values that these tensions suggest all the same.

The artistic and political tensions that are identified with Chinese contemporary art can be understood in relation to the art world's integration with what Bourdieu calls the field of power. As Bourdieu defines it:

The field of power is a *field of forces* defined by the structure of the existing balance of forces between forms of power, or between different species of capital. It is also simultaneously a *field of struggles for power among the holders of different forms of power* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:76)

In this rather difficult definition, Bourdieu means to emphasize that the field of power is not situated in one particular institution or geo-political space

but comprises multiple forces that work in and through many different social fields. While governments and their institutions often manage economic, cultural, and symbolic resources (and for this reason may hold the most dominant position in a large social field), they still represent only one of many influences in the field of power. The field of power is best understood, then, as a very large network of relationships and struggles that occur in and across all social fields, including the artistic field (1993:37-39). These struggles are directed at gaining the dominant social position through the acquisition of different forms of capital. As a result, the field of power is an arena of

struggle over the legitimate principle of domination and for the legitimate mode of reproduction of the foundations of domination. This can take the form of real, physical struggles, (as in 'palace revolutions' or wars of religion for instance) or of symbolic confrontations (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:76).

In the art world, these struggles take the form of symbolic confrontations over the power to name and "impose the dominant definition" (Bourdieu 1993:42) of art and artists. These confrontations are expressed through the production of art, the rituals of the field (awards, exhibitions, the ranking of artists, sales), the competition over various forms of capital that support artistic and cultural production, and in the sometimes very public and vociferous disagreements about what is and is not art (Bourdieu 1993; 1996; Heinich 1998a; 2014).

The theoretical model developed in this study for understanding the valorization of dissidence illuminates at least three ways in which the

production of contemporary art, and therefore the value of dissidence, is integrated with different struggles in the field of power. First, the introduction of Chinese art and artists into the artistic field demonstrates the challenge that any new artistic genre or artist presents to the dominant position within the field. This is the type of symbolic confrontation, instigated by the dissident gesture of radically new and original art, that Heinich explores extensively in her work on contemporary art. Each new artist or genre, Chinese or otherwise, represents a provocative proposition that challenges the dominant definition of what is and is not art. Heinich's three-hand game (1998a) provides a good analogy of how this confrontation operates. In the first hand of the game, the contemporary artist produces a provocative work that transgresses the boundary of what is and is not art. Art world supporters then introduce and mediate this dissident gesture while art world agents who have a vested interest in the dominant position react and challenge the proposition. As such, artists, curators, and institutions are all equally engaged in the confrontations that take place within the artistic field. These conflicts are then manifested in the many different disputes that follow including the numerous debates about modernism and post-modernism (Huysen 1981; Habermas 1983; Foster 1983; 1996; Lyotard [1979] 1984; Buchloh 1984; 1986; Krauss 1985; Jameson 1991), the contemporary art crisis in France (Michaud [1997] 2005; Heinich 1997a; 1998a), discussions about the definition of contemporary art (Smith, Enwezor and Condee 2008; Smith 2009; *October* 2009), and the more

recent disagreements about what makes Chinese art contemporary (Gao 2008; Wu 2008; Gladston 2010a; 2010b; 2014).

Second, the valorization of different forms of political dissidence, whether these are recognized in the cultural differences of an artist or in the political statements expressed in an artwork, illustrate how the artistic field engages in symbolic confrontations extrinsic to the exclusive space of the artistic field. As *ArtReview* claimed in relation to Ai Weiwei: “Ai’s activities have allowed artists to move away from the idea that they work within a privileged zone limited by the walls of a gallery or museum,” and “art’s real context is not simply ‘the market’ or ‘the institution,’ but what’s happening now, around us, in the real world” (*ArtReview* 2011:108). Again, Heinich has explored these confrontations in her studies of controversial art exhibits. In this iteration of the game, art institutions and agents valorize dissident artistic gestures that challenge social, cultural, or political values and the public is forced to re-evaluate their common beliefs. In the most extreme cases, these confrontations are related in extensive media coverage and result in a public outcry that sometimes shuts a controversial exhibit such as Huang Yong Ping’s *Theatre of the World*. The confrontations, however, also contribute to the internal struggles of the artistic field so that, once again, the definition of what is and is not art is challenged. These challenges are then manifested in the extensive discussions and literature on global art (McEvelley 1992; Fisher 1994; Mosquera and Fisher 2004; Elkins 2007; Seijdel 2009; Steeds et al 2013), on “alternative modernities” in nations

outside of the West (Mitter 2007; 2008; Gao 2011; O'Brien et al 2013; Backstrom and Hjartarson 2013), and in the many new texts concerned with introducing and mediating the value of new genres such as Chinese contemporary art.

An important facet of this second symbolic confrontation is how this proposition revives the transformative mission of the original avant-garde. In the early 19th and 20th century, the dissident activities of the artistic and intellectual avant-garde were often valorized for their purported transformative effects. The avant-garde was viewed as a means of changing society, whether this was writ large in political manifestos or proposed as a conceptual or spiritual transformation (Egbert 1967; Poggioli 1968). Thus, despite the claims of difference between modernism and contemporary art (Smith, Enwezor and Condee 2008; Smith 2009; *October* 2009), artistic institutions and agents continue to valorize dissident artistic practices that are understood to challenge and change the normative values of society. This sentiment continues to be promoted not only in relation to specific artworks and exhibitions – such as Chen Zhen's critique of Western consumer society or *Magiciens de la Terre's* provocative challenge to reconsider artistic and cultural values – but also in texts that argue for a more socially engaged art (Bourriaud 2002; Bishop 2004; Wang Chunchen 2010), and the claims that art is ontologically transformative (Agamben [1994] 1999; Rancière 2004b; 2007; 2010; Nancy 2006; 2007). Heinich's studies of the avant-garde (2005) and contemporary art (1997a; 1998a; 2014) open a new direction for

understanding the production of this transformative value but, with her focus on singularity and originality, she does not take this topic further. This leaves open many new questions about how the transformative value of art relates to contemporary art and how, and if, this value actually generates productive change beyond the artistic field.

The third way in which contemporary art is engaged in the symbolic struggles in the field of power is transnationally. As this study indicates, governments and other agencies may appropriate the symbolic value of contemporary art as a means of representing their political values in a larger global field of power relations (a strategy that Joseph S. Nye (2004) calls “soft power”¹). By supporting exhibits of “unofficial” Chinese contemporary art in significant Western venues, for example, Western governments have demonstrated their disapproval of China’s resistance to liberal-democratic reform. In this version of the contemporary art game, Western nations along with their art agencies promote the dissident value of art and take the role of the permissive institution. China, meanwhile, plays the second hand of the game as the “refuser” (Heinich 1998a:330) whose political values have been challenged. Even when it does not react directly to such provocations, Beijing’s response to artistic and political dissidence in China only reinforces

¹ As Nye defines it, soft power is a political strategy used in international relations for “getting others to want the outcomes that you want,” and for getting “others to buy into your values” (2004:5). In contrast to “hard power” (such as military force), “the resources that produce soft power arise in large part from the values an organization or country expresses in its culture, in the examples it sets by its internal practices and policies, and in the way it handles its relations with others” (8).

the provocative nature of these exhibits and prolongs the ideological confrontation between the two political spheres. China, then, along with the Western agencies and governments, plays an important and integral role in the production of the politically dissident value of Chinese contemporary art.

China's engagement in the game of contemporary art introduces a transnational dimension to the ongoing disputes over what is and is not art. Perhaps spurred by the transgressive challenge of this game, the CCP began taking a more pro-active approach to contemporary art in China beginning as early as 2000. An important part of its strategy has been to re-define Chinese contemporary art on its own terms. In a speech inaugurating the opening of a new research academy for contemporary art in 2009, Deputy Minister of Culture Wang Wenzhang admitted the origins of Chinese contemporary art in the West, but also emphasized that China needs to develop a contemporary art that reflects the "contemporary character of Chinese aesthetic values," "the special character of Chinese culture" (2010:005), and a "socialist culture with Chinese characteristics" (2010:007).² In keeping with this objective, the government has supported the presentation of international contemporary art biennales in China (Shanghai Biennale since 2000) and officially exhibited its contemporary art in foreign exhibits since 2001. The CCP has also taken a

² The Contemporary Art Academy of China (CAAC) was inaugurated in Beijing on November 13, 2009. Twenty contemporary artists, many from the '85 Movement, were invited to be directors of the Academy. Wang's speech was reprinted and translated in an exhibition catalogue in 2010. I quote from this translation (Wang Wenzhang 2009; 2010). Wang's proposal that China should create a contemporary art with Chinese characteristics plays on Deng Xiaoping's introduction of a capitalist market economy in the 1980s that would be built upon socialism with Chinese characteristics.

more tolerant and supportive approach to contemporary art within China by officially approving once-controversial art villages such as 798 in Beijing, allowing private contemporary art galleries and museums to open in different cities across the country, and allowing changes to the post-secondary art curriculum so that students may study new media and explore experimental practices. All of these initiatives have put significant economic and cultural capital into the production of contemporary art in China, and the results of this official support can be measured to some extent in the return to China of important artists from the '85 Movement such as Xu Bing, Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Gu Wenda. Attracted by exhibition offers, affordable studio space, and prestigious teaching positions, some of these artists appear to have accepted a kind of amnesty to work with, rather than against, Chinese authorities. Still, as the example of Ai Weiwei's 2011 imprisonment demonstrates, re-defining Chinese contemporary art according to an official mandate and offering prestigious positions within China's arts infrastructure may not be enough to shift the dynamics of the game. China continues to impose many restrictions on artistic expression.³

³ For example, the CCP and its agencies maintain close supervision over all public exhibits in national and provincial venues and restrict the presentation of any exhibits or artwork that they deem critical of the Party or the nation. All Chinese artworks leaving the country for exhibition abroad must also pass through a censorship procedure. While I was completing research in China in the Spring of 2010, a Beijing gallery owner who has operated in China since the 1990s confided to me that China had instituted new rules for shipping art out of the country. All artworks had to undergo censorship in the guise of a "customs check" before the work could leave the country. For example, the gallery owner was quizzed on the significance of the red lines that ran through one artist's photographic works.

In order to comply with these restrictions and enjoy the fruits of a more accommodating government, artists and exhibit organizers are pressured to self-censor. In other words, the institutions of art in China powered by the CCP continue to resist the permissive paradox of contemporary art; that is, they do not fully encourage or validate the “obligatory transgression” of contemporary art.

By refusing the dissident value of contemporary, the Chinese government effectively creates and affirms the limits that artists in China continually play against. It is this limit that gives the dissidence of Chinese art and artists a unique and singular place in the contemporary art field. As Heinrich proposes, contemporary art asserts an “operation that has been reiterated by the artistic avant-garde since the beginning of the century: that is transgressing one frontier and, in transgressing it, revealing it to us” (Heinich 1998a:9). Western artists, originating and practicing within the boundaries of a permissive liberal democracy, exercise their right of dissent and are valorized for revealing the artistic and political limitations within the democratic space. The Chinese artists as dissident, originating in the limiting political territory of authoritarian China, are valorized for challenging the limits of democracy and revealing the frontier where liberal democracy meets its Other.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Artist Interview Template

Chinese Artistic Field

1. When and where were you born?
2. What was your parents' education and profession?
3. Are there any artists in your family?
4. When did you decide to be an artist? What motivated this decision?
5. Describe your artistic training in China.
6. How did you support yourself before your art education and after your art education?
7. While in China what were your experiences with Western art?
Books, art exhibits, encounters with Westerners, western curators.
8. Describe the type of art you were making before you went to France (medium, subject).
9. Where did you exhibit your work?
10. How was your work received in China?
11. What was your relationship to the Chinese Artists Association?

Transition to France

12. What motivated your move from China?
13. Why France?
14. How did you move to France? What assistance, if any, did you receive?
15. Did you speak French before you left for France?
16. How did you support yourself in France?
17. Did you enroll in any formal art studies after arriving in France? When? Where?

18. Describe the type of art you were making once you moved to France (medium, subject, etc).
19. If your work did change, what motivated this change in direction?
20. How do you feel about your life in France?
21. Did you become a French citizen, when or why not? What motivated this decision?

Exhibition History in France and Internationally

22. Your first exhibit in France: How did this come about?
23. Have you been part of any group exhibits sponsored by the French government presented inside or outside of France?
 - Insert individual questions regarding specific exhibits
24. How would you describe the reaction to your work in France, how do the French interpret your work?
25. How did your first sale come about? Which gallery, buyer, etc.
26. Who are the primary buyers of your work? Private collectors, businesses, government?
27. Which countries are your collectors from: France or elsewhere?
28. Which gallery or galleries represent you now?
29. Which Chinese curators have you worked with and how did that relationship develop?
30. Which French or western curators have you worked with and how did that relationship develop?
31. How would you describe your overall career since coming to France?

Return to the Chinese artistic field

Many artists who left China in the 80s and 90s are now returning and exhibiting in China. Some have moved back permanently.

32. How would you describe your present relationship with China and the Chinese artistic field?

33. How would you describe your present relationship with China and the Chinese artistic field?

34. Have you been part of any group exhibits sponsored by the Chinese government?

- Insert individual questions about exhibits in China or China sponsored shows.

35. Among curators and academics there has been much discussion about why contemporary Chinese art has been so significant in the West. They talk about the “Chineseness” of Chinese art, that this quality is some sort of aesthetic that has attracted attention to your work in the international field. What do you think of this?

36. You have been involved in a several large exhibit projects that have taken your work to different countries. These exhibits deal with the phenomenon of the “global artist” and they appear to propose that there is no longer any boundaries in the art world. As a participant artist, as a global artist, what do you think of this?

37. One last question: Why do you think your work and the work of other Chinese artists suddenly became so significant in the international artistic field after 1990?

Appendix II: **Curator Interview Template**

Background

38. You have followed a similar career path, from China to France, as the artists in my study. Perhaps we can start by talking about your educational background and the circumstances that led to you becoming a curator?

39. While in China what were your experiences with Western art?

Books, art exhibits, encounters with Westerners, western curators.

40. What was your relationship to the Chinese Art Association?

41. What motivated you to leave China? Why France?

42. How did you move to France? What assistance, if any, did you receive?

43. Did you speak French before you left for France?

44. How did you support yourself in France when you first arrived?

45. Did you enroll in any formal art studies after arriving in France? When? Where?

46. How would you describe your overall career since coming to France?

47. Did you become a French citizen, when or why not? What motivated this decision?

Curatorial History in France and Internationally

48. You were one of the first curators to present the work by Chinese contemporary artists outside of China. Why was it important to present the work of these artists?

- Insert questions on specific exhibits and situations and artists

49. Many curators and artists have returned to China in the last 10 years. How would you describe your present relationship with China and the Chinese artistic field?

- Discuss specific projects in China

50. Why do you think the work of contemporary Chinese artists suddenly became so significant in the international artistic field after 1990?

51. What has sustained the interest?

Appendix III: Analysis of Participant Artists: *Les Magiciens de la Terre*

Data

45 artists residing in Europe (including Israel), North America, Australia, and New Zealand but excluding Aboriginal artists from North America, Australia and New Zealand. Includes 9 artists originating from countries outside of these Western regions but who claim residency within the region.

4 Japanese artists

3 artists from Eastern Europe - two from the USSR and one from Czechoslovakia

7 Aboriginal artists from Australia and North America

41 Artists from nations in Central America (including the Caribbean), South America, Africa, and Asia (excluding Japan)

Total Artists: 100

Western Artists: 50 (includes the 4 Japanese artists and one artist from the USSR)

Non-Western Artists: 50

Of these 50:

31 artists produce work as marketable aesthetic objects.

19 artists produce work as traditional or ritual practices.

Three Tribes as described by Rugemer (1989):

50% of the artists in "first tribe."

31% of the artists in "second tribe."

19% of artists in "third tribe."

Analysis

1. Division by West and Non-West

100 artists were invited to participate in *Magiciens de la Terre*: 50 purportedly veterans of the Euro-American dominated international contemporary art field and 50 new artists from outside the dominant Western regions. Despite this claim, dividing the artists into definitive categories on either side is not simple. Using the exhibition catalogue, the official exhibition website (<http://magiciensdelaterre.fr>), and internet research on the individual artists' careers, I have developed my own divisions for the show, dividing the artists into two categories that are then further defined.

45 artists are noted as residing in Western nations while 9 of these originate from outside the West. All of these artists were already recognized within the artistic field prior to 1989. These are the bulk of the artists who make up what I will call the Western side of the show.

A number of artists are difficult to categorize. There are a number of "grey area" artists such as artists from Japan, Eastern Europe (the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia), and Aboriginal artists from North America and Australia. After the WWII and as part of its plan to integrate with Euro-America politically and economically, Japan (along with Korea) developed its arts infrastructure – building museums in line with Euro-American standards, hosting exhibits of contemporary art, and participating in Euro-American artistic events such as the Venice Biennale. All of the Japanese artists were previously recognized through extensive exhibits in Japan and several exhibits outside of Japan in either the United States or Europe. In a remark made in an interview, the exhibit curator Jean-Hubert Martin included Japan along with North America and Europe as part of the "international" art world (Martin and Francblin 1989:34). For these reasons I have included the Japanese artists as part of the Western group.

Artists from the Communist Bloc nations of Eastern Europe also represent a problem in categorization. Historically artists from Eastern Europe have worked within the Western idiom of artistic production (oil painting, etc.) and it has been political differences that have kept these artists from participating in the contemporary field. Of the two artists from the USSR, only Ilya Kabakov had already been actively participating in the Western contemporary field before 1989. Unlike Kabakov, who produces installations, the other Soviet artist and the Czechoslovakian artist were producing realist and abstract painting. This may be why their work had not been recognized in Western Europe before 1989. For this reason, I have

counted Kabakov as part of the Western group and the other two artists as part of the non-Western.

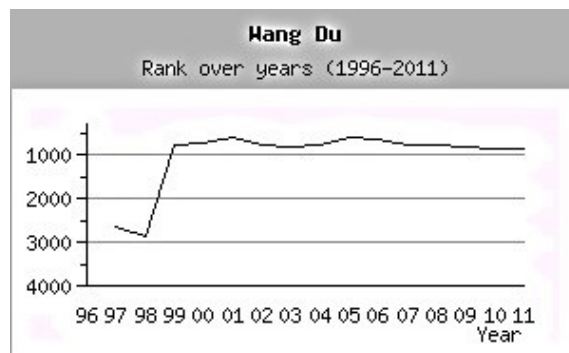
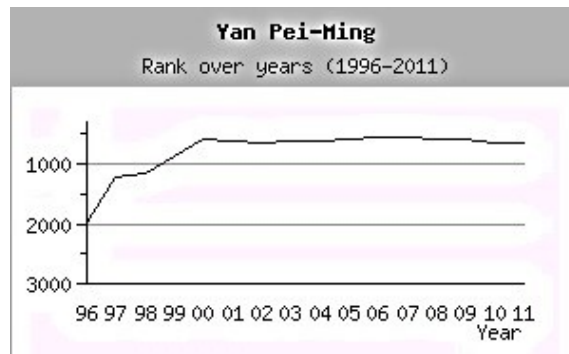
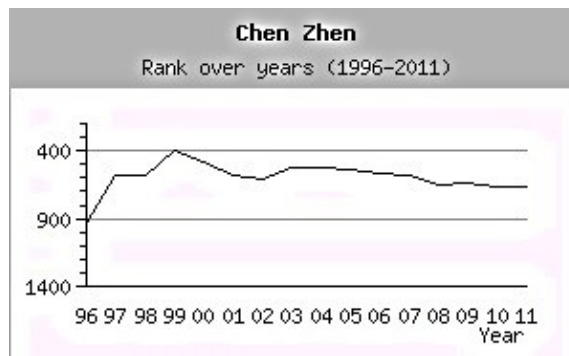
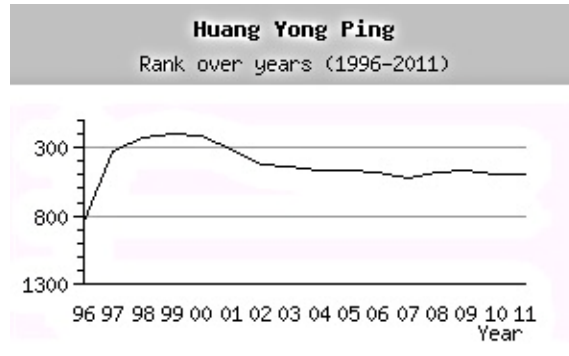
The Aboriginal artists from Australia and North America are also in an unusual position. Some of these artists, like Canada's Norval Morisseau and Australia's Jimmy Wululu, were already recognized in the artistic field prior to 1989 as part of an earlier wave of identity art that included indigenous people. These artists draw on traditional imagery that is sometimes modernized by using Western techniques and materials (such as printmaking and oil painting). Still, these artists had not been part of major exhibits outside of their own countries. For this reason, I have put them with the non-Western group.

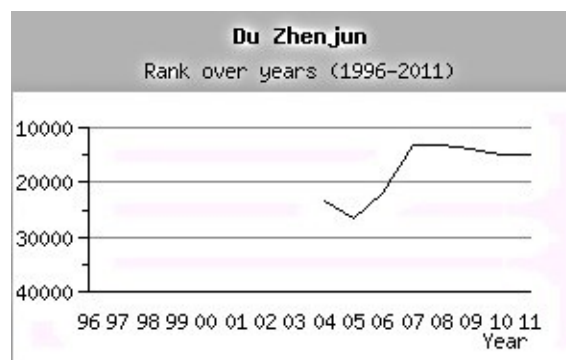
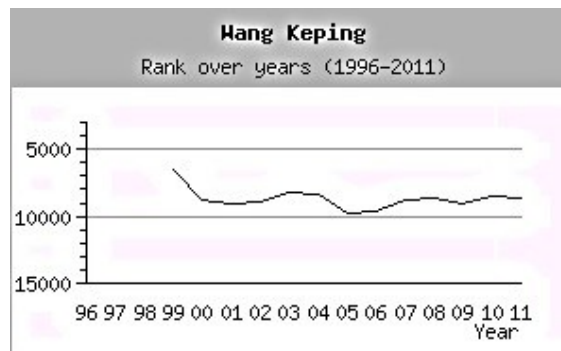
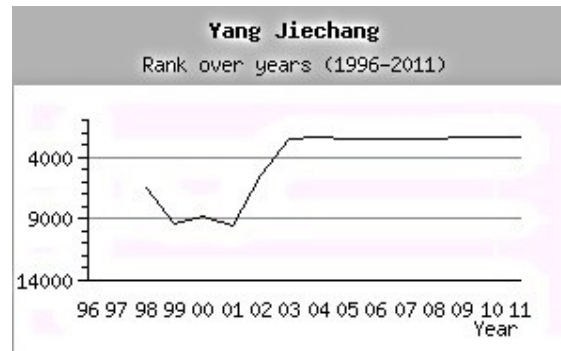
2. Division of Non-Western Artists

I have further divided the non-Western artist in order to understand the "three tribes" described by Rugemer (1989). Again this was a difficult task since contemporary art can take many forms, as Jean-Hubert Martin was trying to demonstrate with the exhibit. For example, a mural painter from India could appear to be making an installation wall painting, especially when viewed in the context of a Western art museum. Many of the non-Western artists also employ materials such as paint, plaster, and metal in ways that could also be considered "Western." Rather than divide the artists by medium or the types of object produced (painting, sculpture, etc.), I have divided them into two categories: artists who have a record of producing marketable aesthetic objects and artists who produce objects intended for ritual or traditional practice. For example, an Australian Aboriginal artist painting dream imagery on canvas I have counted as producing marketable aesthetic objects whereas an Australian Aboriginal producing a sand painting meant for a ritual I have included in the category of ritual and traditional practices. I have based these categories on work that the artists produced prior to and for *Magiciens de la Terre*. Some artists in the second category transitioned into the first category after *Magiciens* when Western collectors took an interest in their work.

Appendix IV : Artist Rankings on ArtFacts.net

1996-2011





Note: No ranking was recorded for Ru Xiaofan during this period.
All charts produced by ArtFacts.net.

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