The 2000 Shanghai
The making of a historical event

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The 2000 Shanghai Biennale was held from 6 November 2000 to 6 January 2001 in the newly expanded Shanghai Art Museum. Soon after its opening – and long before it completed its full course – people were already envisioning it as history.
Thus we heard much about its projected ‘historical significance’ during the first few days of the show, albeit from divergent positions and conflicting points of view. An official opinion, put forward most forcefully by the museum itself, was that the biennale was deemed to become a landmark in the history of contemporary Chinese art. Fang Zengxian, the museum’s chief official and the director of the biennale’s artistic committee, made this grandiose statement:

The significance of [the biennale’s] success will far transcend the exhibition itself. As an activity established on an international scale that seriously addresses the issues of globalisation, post-colonialism and regionalism, etc., this Shanghai Biennale will set a good example for our Chinese colleagues and is bound to secure its due status among other world-famous biennale art exhibitions.¹

Independent art critics and artists also voiced their opinions. Some of them confirmed the biennale’s landmark significance, but constructed such significance according to different historical frameworks. Others criticised the biennale and organised counter-activities. But like any antagonism, the intensity of these criticisms and activities revealed the pressure and attraction created by the subject, in this case the biennale.

This essay reflects on these different reactions to the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, not only because these opinions contribute to the biennale’s complex meaning, but also because they testify to different positions in the current construction of the history of contemporary Chinese art—a history being written in multiple versions and with multiple voices.

Why were opinions about the biennale’s ‘historical significance’ spelt out in such a speedy and urgent manner and why did the exhibition become ‘past’ even before its completion? The reason seems simple: from the moment the news broke about the Shanghai Art Museum’s plan to organise a ‘truly international’ biennale, the exhibition was perceived, discussed and debated in China as an event. Practical matters directly related to its planning and execution—the selection of the curators and artists, the possible restrictions and compromises imposed by the government, new ways of raising funds and their implications—dominated the discussion; the exhibition’s content and contribution to art itself attracted much less attention.²

The biennale also stimulated other anticipated events, including a host of so-called ‘satellite’ exhibitions organised by independent curators and non-governmental galleries.³ As art events, both the biennale and the satellite shows largely fulfilled their mission. A strong sense of a series of linked ‘happenings’ was generated by the exhibitions opening...
within two or three days of each other, and by the sudden get-together of a large number of artists and critics. Not only did the museum invite many guests (including some of international renown), each of the satellite shows also formed its own ‘public’. While the gap between official and unofficial activities remained, participants often intermingled and roamed together from one show to another, and from one party to another. A few days later, however, Shanghai was empty; the satellite shows closed and the biennale alone continued, no longer threatened by competition and possible disruption, but also bereft of the excitement and exuberance that had surrounded the opening days.

This situation confirms an observation I have made elsewhere, namely that in the late 1990s and 2000, the exhibition itself – its form, timing, location and function – became a dominant issue in Chinese art. This issue attracts many curators and artists, and has brought them into linked activities and interactions, not about art per se, in that they are not directly concerned with media, style or subject matter, but closely related to the development of contemporary Chinese art, because the divergent focus and purpose of an exhibition often predetermines the ideological orientations and stylistic choices of the works in it. Many ‘experimental exhibitions’ have been organised to test the public roles of contemporary art and to ‘legalise’ new and novel artforms.

An ‘event’ is different from a ‘historical event’. To qualify as the latter, the 2000 Shanghai Biennale must signify a particular historical temporal and locality. It is here that we find conflicting notions and positions, and hence different constructions of contemporary Chinese art history. Returning to the Shanghai Art Museum’s own rhetoric, the biennale was identified as a historic milestone because it inaugurated a ‘global’ era for the contemporary Chinese art exhibition industry. This view might puzzle some people because contemporary Chinese art has been part of the global art scene since the early 1990s, and many important international exhibitions regularly feature works by contemporary Chinese artists. The view becomes understandable when we realise that it relates particularly to officially sponsored exhibitions in China, which, before the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, were largely ‘local’. Recalling that Beijing’s National Art Gallery continues to refuse to show installation, performance and multimedia works, the Shanghai Biennale’s reformist, even revolutionary, nature can be seen.

For the Shanghai Art Museum itself the 2000 biennale represents a huge breakthrough: it allows this official art institution to proudly announce its entrance into the global era. True, from the first Shanghai Biennale in 1996 the museum adopted the fashionable term ‘biennale’ – Shuang nian zhan in Chinese – but such an adoption was superficial as the exhibition was largely domestic and traditional. The 1996 and 1998 Shanghai biennales were viewed as preliminary stages in a long-term evolution towards the established international norm, when the museum’s biennale would join the ranks of other ‘true’ biennales and triennales, such as Venice, Lyon, Kwangju, Sydney and Yokohama.

This official, evolutionary approach to contemporary Chinese art was tied to a definite locality in 2000: Shanghai. In fact, only by linking the biennale with the city’s Herculean effort to (re)assert its global, cosmopolitan identity can we understand the exhibition’s true rationale and feasibility. Yet viewed in this context, this flashy and costly biennale did not really showcase contemporary Shanghai. Housed in a refurbished colonial building, the visual display it offered to an international audience was nowhere near as spectacular as the cityscape of Pudong. An oversized architectural circus, Pudong startles visitors with a naked desire to impress and with an exaggerated ambition to propel the whole city from the past into the future. Just a few days prior to the opening of the biennale, Shanghai also expressed the same desire and ambition through the largest staging of Verdi’s Aida ever attempted. Performed by Chinese and foreign

above: SUI JIANGUO, Study on the Folding of Clothes, 2000, sculptures, dimensions variable; left: FANG LJIUN, Untitled, 2000, woodcut, 4.8 x 7.2 m.
musicians, it featured a grand march consisting of 3000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers dressed as Egyptian warriors, and all the available elephants in Shanghai.

There is no question that the 2000 Shanghai Biennale facilitated a program of globalisation on a municipal level. The exhibition's thematic title was 'Shanghai Spirit' in English, and 'Haishang, Shanghai' in Chinese. The Chinese title literally means 'Shanghai Over the Sea', and relates this coastal city to the ocean, marine culture and the outside world. Having pushed the idea of a Shanghai spirit this far, the exhibition's organisers had to stop and reassert the national identity of their project. Thus the rationalisation or idea of the biennale, its internationalisation and globalisation, was eventually backgrounds, while the exhibition itself 'endeavored to promote Chinese mainstream culture'. It was even said that this biennale would serve a nationalistic cause by under mining the dominance of foreign curators in setting standards for contemporary Chinese art. Such words became hollow and self-contradictory, however, given that the museum invited two curators from outside China, despite the fact that many independent curators in China had campaigned for years to organise domestic shows.

So what do these independent curators and art critics have to say about the 2000 Shanghai Biennale? Here the voices become less distinct and certainly not uniform. Partly because the Shanghai Art Museum invited two international curators of independent status - Hou Hanru and Toshio Shimizu - to join its curatorial team, some independent Chinese curators felt the conventional gap separating government-sponsored art exhibitions from their own projects was significantly diminished. In other words, although no independent Chinese curators were directly involved, the government-sponsored biennale did reflect some radical changes. Significantly, the two most crucial changes were also the two most sought-after goals of the 'experimental exhibitions' organised by independent curators. The first goal of independent curators has been to control the curatorship of major art exhibitions. They believe individual curators, not government institutions and committees, should be
directly responsible for an exhibition’s content, form and purpose, and should have the power and right to control these matters. Their second goal was to ‘normalise’ or ‘legalise’ (he fa hua) experimental art, to create legitimate exhibition spaces for controversial artforms and styles as well as for works that challenge social and political norms.

It seems that these two goals were realised, at least partly, in the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, which included video and installation works by some experimental Chinese artists. To the independent Chinese curators who have been campaigning for these reforms, this is clearly a victory. Thus they constructed the biennale’s ‘historical significance’ in quite a different way from the museum’s: while the museum interpreted the biennale as representing a new stage in an officially sponsored evolution from the local to the global, independent curators and critics linked the biennale to previous unofficial exhibitions. From their point of view, the reforms in this biennale are the result, to a large extent, of their persistent efforts in challenging and reinventing the old exhibition system in China. Thus Zhu Qingsheng – a Peking University professor who is also an avant-garde artist and critic – claimed that the 2000 Shanghai Biennale was the most important Chinese exhibition since the 1989 ‘China/Avant-Garde’ show. Gu Chenceng – another veteran organiser and critic of experimental art – recalled the 1992 Guangzhou Biennale organised by independent curators, which according to him initiated many new curatorial practices that then influenced subsequent art exhibitions in China. Many other statements reflect different experiences and judgments. Taken together, however, they reflect a collective attempt to forge an unofficial historiography which attributes the main force behind the opening up of China’s exhibition channels not to official reforms, but to initiatives in the unofficial sectors in Chinese art, and to the general course of globalisation.

This view can be supported because an unambiguous historical process leading to these two reforms witnessed in the 2000 Shanghai Biennale can be mapped out. Avant-garde art exhibitions became prevalent in China in the 1980s, organised largely by artists or committees formed by art critics. Independent curators (duli cezhanren) began to appear only in the 1990s, and the reasons for their emergence include, among others, a growing knowledge of international art practices and the increasing presence of Hong Kong, Taiwanese and western curators in China. Usually not employed by official or commercial galleries, these individuals organised art exhibitions primarily out of personal interest, and their projects thus reflected strong individual preferences, knowledge and social aspirations.

Some of the numerous exhibitions organised by these independent curators in the 1990s were ambitious undertakings aimed at establishing a new exhibition system in China. The Guangzhou Biennale mentioned earlier, for example, included more than 350 artists and had a goal of establishing a market system for contemporary Chinese art. Collaborative projects between independent curators and private, semi-public, and even official galleries increased after the mid-1990s. Some of these projects failed – one outstanding example being the ‘First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art’ organised by Huang Zhan. Installed in two primary sites in Beijing, it campaigned for a more active and independent role for individual curators in organising large, public art exhibitions. The government cancelled the show before its opening. But there were also plenty of successful cases; for example, Huang Zhan later worked with the He Xiangning Art Gallery in Shenzhen to organise the gallery’s ‘Second Yearlong Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition’, an exhibition that aimed to explore the complex relationship between experimentation and public function, academic values and visual attractiveness.

It would be a mistake, however, to take Huang Zhan, or any other curator, as representative of all independent curators and experimental artists, because goals and agendas are by no means shared in this multifaceted, ‘unofficial’ art community. In fact, some independent curators and artists openly oppose any collaboration with official art...
institutions, which they consider opportunistic and against the spirit of the avant-garde. In late 2000 this position was most self-consciously embodied by the off-biennale exhibition ‘Buhezuo Fangshi’ – literally meaning ‘ways of non-cooperation’, but rendered in English by the exhibition’s organisers as ‘Fuck Off’. Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, curators of the show, explain this project:

‘Fuck Off’ is an event initiated by a group of curators and artists who share a common identity as ‘alternative’. In today’s art, the ‘alternative’ position entails challenging and criticising the power discourse and popular conventions. In an uncooperative and uncompromising way, it self-consciously resists the threat of assimilation and vulgarisation.12

So the curators of ‘Fuck Off’, like the Shanghai Biennale organisers, conceived their exhibition as an event, but one designed to counter and subvert the ‘master event’ – the biennale. In their vision, this ‘alternative’ exhibition, though much smaller and off-centre, would challenge and debase the biennale’s centrality and dominance. In an interview, Ai Weiwei refused to call his show a ‘satellite’ or ‘peripheral’ activity.13 The statement cited above makes it clear that to Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi their exhibition represented the ‘alternative’ position in contemporary Chinese art, playing a critical role in challenging the dominant ‘power discourse’ at this historical moment. From this position, they interpreted the biennale as posing a threat of assimilation and vulgarisation: the inclusion of some experimental artists in this official showcase could only destroy their experimental spirit. Their rejection of this reformist official exhibition, therefore, also implied their rejection of a reformist historical narrative centred on the evolution or transformation of the official exhibition system, whether this narrative was formulated by the art establishment itself or by independent curators who hoped to change the system from within.

Some artists shared this anti-establishment position and designed individual ‘art events’ to express their sentiments. One of these projects, a series of interactive ‘web advertisements’ created by Xu Tan, was designed to mimic the biennale’s publicity campaign. The poster-like advertisements bear slogans such as ‘The 2000 Shanghai Biennale [sic] Awaits Your Arrival’ and carry the museum’s website address. The image under the words, however, features young female prostitutes putting on make-up before receiving clients. A subtler project was carried out by Li Wei, who appeared at the biennale on the exhibition’s opening day with his head framed by a large, rectangular mirror. This was a continuation of many similar performances Li Wei has conducted since 1998. Always wearing a ‘mirror collar’, he has photographed himself in a number of significant locations; in front of Tiananmen, on the Great Wall, before foreign tourists on the Altar to Heaven, and among dead pigs in a butcher’s shop. In each case, the mirror transforms the buildings and people before him into elusive and reversed images. So when he stepped into the Shanghai Art Museum, the mirror again made its target – this time the biennale – into unreality.14

Generally, however, projects directly critiquing the biennale were few; most works in the off-biennale exhibitions – even in ‘Fuck
Off’ – did not engage with the ‘master event’. Gu Dexin’s installation Sofa: 2000.11.4, 2000, in ‘Fuck Off’ was an exception, clearly connecting itself with the biennale. In this installation, a red armchair stuffed with raw meat was placed in front of a framed painting. The painting is red and imageless; only the opening date of the biennale has been written on the canvas. Moreover, to my knowledge no Chinese artist invited to participate in the biennale turned down the invitation. I was also not surprised to learn that the organisers of ‘Fuck Off’ practised self-censorship to ensure the show’s realisation, eliminating and restricting some art projects that might have provoked cancellation by the authorities. These situations raise questions about how an ‘alternative’ exhibition such as ‘Fuck Off’ challenged the official show, how effectively it shifted the power centre, and to what extent it realised its uncooperative intentionality. The historical significance of ‘Fuck Off’, in my view, mainly lies in its assertion of an alternative position, thus keeping this position vital in contemporary Chinese art. But it was far from clear, either in this particular exhibition or generally, what ‘alternative’ means beyond self-positioning, attitude and verbal expressions, and this is perhaps why no real confrontation between the biennale and other shows was found in the works themselves.

The biennale’s selection of artworks – ranging from Liang Shuo’s realistic Urban Peasants to Matthew Barney’s iconoclastic Cremaster 4, 1994 – was clearly a compromise of hugely different aesthetic positions and judgments. The off-biennale exhibitions were much less serious and more dynamic, containing some works that were aggressive and even deliberately shocking. But stylistic and ideological solidarity was again not the goal of the works in these shows. To me, with their conflicting self-identities and complex self-contradictions, all these exhibitions – both official and unofficial – contributed to something larger, and will be remembered as part of an exciting moment in contemporary Chinese art.

2 The curators of the exhibition seem to share this attitude. When curator Hou Hanru was asked to evaluate the exhibition’s artworks, symposium and infrastructure, Hou emphasised the biennale’s ‘impact’ on curatorial methods and exhibition channels in China: ‘The time has not only arrived, but the process has begun.’ Zhu Qi, ‘We’ve Become True Individuals – An Interview with Hou Hanru – Curator of the Shanghai 2000 Biennale’, Contemporary Chinese Art e-Bulletin vol. 3, issue 6, 2000, www.chineseart.com.
3 Four of these unofficial exhibitions had strong thematic focuses and published exhibition catalogues. These were: ‘Buhezuo Fangshi’ (‘Fuck Off’), curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi; ‘Richang Yu Yichang’ (‘Normal and Abnormal’), curated by Gu Zhengqing; ‘Youxia Q’ (‘Useful Life’), organised by Yang Zhenzhong, Yang Fudong and Xu Zhen; and ‘Yu Wo Youguan’ (‘About Me’), curated by Lin Xiaodong.
5 For a discussion of the concept of ‘experimental exhibition’, see ibid., p. 17.
7 ibid.
8 Zhu Qingsheng expressed this opinion in his paper given to the symposium held in conjunction with the 2000 Shanghai Biennale. For Gu Chenfeng’s view see ‘Xiangqi Guangzhou Shuangqianzhan’ (Recalling the Guangzhou Biennale), Shanghai Meishuguang Tongxuan (SAM magazine), no. 34, 2000, p. 5.
10 This exhibition is documented in Exhibiting Experimental Art in China, op. cit., pp. 135–41.
14 Li Wei’s performance at the biennale was cut short: he was invited to a side room in the museum and was advised to leave his mirror there before leaving. But he told me that he was not mistreated and had a civil conversation with several museum personnel.

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