Although works of art in traditional mediums and styles — whether Chinese ink painting or neo-classical sculpture — are continuously produced now in Beijing or New York, we are reluctant to call them contemporary art because of their voluntary exemption from contemporaneity. Similarly, we distinguish current expressions of vanguardism from the historical avant-garde: the latter inspires a retrospective gaze travelling back in time, the former points to a visionary future through destabilising the present. Contemporaneity thus does not simply pertain to what is here and now, but must be recognised as a particular artistic/theoretical construct that self-consciously reflects upon the conditions and limitations of the present, thereby substantiating the present — an unmediated time/place in common sense — with individualised references, languages and points of view. To map contemporaneity in contemporary art is, therefore, to locate such references, languages and points of view. Necessarily based on individual works by individual artists, this type of analysis also has the potential to reveal common trends and large concepts underlying separate attempts at visual forms that are intrinsically contemporary.

AGAINST MONUMENTALITY

One common strategy in pursuing contemporaneity in contemporary art is to subvert traditional monumentality, a term whose Latin root monumentum means 'to remind and to admonish'. To serve the role of admonition, a traditional monument is frequently an imposing and impersonal structure dominating a public space — the Arc de Triomphe, the Lincoln Memorial, the Monument to the People's Heroes in Tiananmen Square. For Georges Bataille, these and other monumental structures 'are erected like dikes, opposing the logic and majesty of authority against all disturbing elements: it is in the form of cathedral or palace that Church or State speaks to the multitudes and imposes silence upon them'.

It is, therefore, not surprising that monuments as symbols of power and collectivity become targets of avant-garde attacks. A pioneer in this avant-garde tradition is Claes Oldenburg, who designed a series of countermonuments, including a pair of scissors that perodies the Washington Monument. 'The scissors are an obvious morphological equivalent to the obelisk, with interesting differences — metal for stone, humble and modern for ancient, movement for monumentality'.

Without a particular official monument as the subject of subversion, Suh Do-Ho's Public figures 1998–2000 in the 49th Venice Biennale (2001) can also be defined as a typical, though more abstract, countermonument. The main body of the work is a white, rectangular cubic in the shape of a pedestal for a monumental statue. But the statue is only implied; the voluminous pedestal stands alone, supported by numerous tiny figures. The pedestal is wordless and the figures are faceless; what this work alludes to, therefore, is the opposition and interdependence between two kinds of anonymous forces — those of a repressive power and a nameless people. As Bataille and other writers have noted, such opposition and interdependence lie at the heart of any traditional monument.
The pedestal in Public figures disappears in Suh Do-Ho's other works, leaving the tiny figures to either form a thick mat or support a transparent floor. Occasionally the audience can walk or stand on top of the mat or floor. The artist thus invites the audience to take the place of the missing pedestal and statue — to embody the role of a monument looming over the dominated, and thus to reflect critically upon its monumentality. In this way these works are no longer counter-monuments but anti-monuments. The difference between the two is that a counter-monument subverts traditional monumentality by transforming a conventional monument into something else. Its violation of traditional monumentality is still measured against a conventional monument, and this violation results in a new monumental form (such as the white pedestal in Public figures). An anti-monument, on the other hand, rejects any form of monumental expression and gains its significance from erasing such expression.

In China, numerous counter-monuments have been attempted by young experimental artists in the past ten to fifteen years. Many of these projects have taken place along the Great Wall, a prime national monument that symbolizes both the country’s political identity and its historical heritage. Xu Bing’s Ghosts pounding the Wall 1990, for example, started out as a project to make ink rubbings from the Great Wall. When the rubbings are put together in an exhibition, the solid brick-structure is transfigured into its volumeless shadow, and the national monument is transformed into the work of an individual artist. Wang Youshen, on the other hand, covered a section of the Great Wall with newspapers. Having worked as a newspaper editor for many years, he knows too well how much the Wall owes its monumentality to propaganda. Wende Gu’s series of monuments of the “United Nations” which commenced in 1993 is well known. Instead of building monuments with stone or steel, he uses the most ephemeral remains of the human body (hair) to create spectacular ‘monuments’ for different countries and races.

Anti-monuments are fewer, partly because by nature these are works of conceptual art that demand greater radicalism in conceptualisation and design. In addition to Suh Do-Ho’s works mentioned above, Song Dong’s performance Breathing offers an exceptionally powerful example in this genre. It was New Year’s Eve, 1996. Holiday lights outlined the familiar contour of Tiananmen in the distance; the temperature was minus nine degrees Centigrade. Song Dong lay motionless, face down in the deserted Tiananmen Square, breathing onto the cement pavement for forty minutes. A thin layer of ice gradually formed on the ground before his mouth, seemingly increasing in thickness and solidity with each breath. When he left the square, the ice was still shimmering like an elusive islet in an ocean of concrete. It disappeared before the next morning, leaving no visible trace.

To be sure, many works in contemporary Chinese avant-garde art have attempted to demystify Tiananmen by blaspheming this most sacred symbol of Communist China. Song Dong, however, departs from the logic of iconoclasm. The meaning of Breathing lies in the artist’s desperate effort to inject life into the immense official space where the June Fourth Movement ended in bloodshed in 1989. There is little doubt that Song Dong designed the art project as a tribute to the memory of this failed pro-democratic movement. His performance (and the photograph that documents it) brings us back to that heated month in 1989 when demonstrators transformed the space in front of Tiananmen into an exhilarating ‘living place’, and reminds us that whatever the year, 1989 or 2002, the Square still remains an unfeeling, repressive monolith.
RUINS, DEMOLITION, DISTINCTION

Pursuit of contemporaneity gives rise to many ruin images in contemporary Asian art. Although modern representations of ruins have a general emphasis on the present, images of war ruins in the early part of the twentieth century served nationalists as negative proofs for a bright future, while ‘memory images’ of the Cultural Revolution and other human calamities allude to a tragic past in the history of a specific country. In contrast, recent images of urban ruins are remarkable for their lack of any sense of historicity — not only no past and future, but no concept even of the present. Rong Rong’s photograph 1997 No. 1 (1) Beijing, for example, shows part of Beijing in the late 1990s. The scene is terrifying: hundreds of houses were turned into ruins and a whole area in this famously crowded city suddenly became a no-man’s-land. What has happened? Where are the residents? The picture offers few clues. What it offers, at the centre of the image, are abandoned illusions: pin-ups posted on a surviving wall of a half-destroyed house. The pictures are torn; but the women in them keep their composure, staring sweetly at the surrounding bricks and dirt with unchanging expressions.

This photograph is one of many images in contemporary Chinese art that represent the transformation of the city. A striking aspect of major Chinese cities like Beijing or Shanghai over the past ten years, has been the never-ending destruction and construction. This situation is both the context and the content of Rong Rong’s photograph. As a result, the image highlights three characteristics that define the contemporaneity in this type of work: 1. the lack of an apparent political or ideological agenda; 2. the absence or disappearance of the human subject; and 3. a skewed temporality and spatiality. While the very act of representing architectural ruins testifies to the artists’ fascination with torn and broken forms and the intention to shock and wound, it is by no means clear what is actually wounded besides the buildings themselves. The absence of the human subject implicit in Rong Rong’s photograph becomes the central theme of Zhan Wang’s series of tortured sculpted figures, which are empty shells without a real body to feel pain. Sometimes Zhan Wang displayed these figures in a ruined building and took photographs. The pictures recall wartime ruins; but the resemblance is deliberately superficial because the figures are mannequins, and even the ruin appears as a stage set under artificial lights.
The missing subject is sometimes identified as the artist himself. Sui Jianguo’s site-specific installation *The relocation of the Central Academy of Fine Arts* 1985 is arguably the best example of this type. The Central Academy of Fine Arts, China’s number one art school during the past fifty years, was located near Wangfujing, the most famous commercial district in Beijing. In 1994, the school was informed that it had to move to a new location within a few months, because the city’s government had sold or ‘rented’ its campus to a Hong Kong real estate developer. There were some protest attempts by teachers and students, but before long the school’s northern section, where the Department of Sculpture had its classrooms, was demolished. Sui Jianguo, an assistant professor in the department at the time, cleared and paved the ground of a non-existent classroom and arranged rows of chairs, a desk, and two bookcases filled with broken bricks. ‘This is not a protest’, he told me in an interview, ‘because we are no longer there’.

Like Zhan Wang’s work, the content of Sui Jianguo’s installation is the absence or disappearance of the subject. Rong Rong’s photograph has a related but different focus: he fills the vacancy and replaces the missing subject with images that originally decorated an interior, but which have now become the exterior. But the viewer is still cluedless about the missing owner of the pin-ups: they are too superficial to help recognize any individuality; this is exactly why they were left behind.

In other words, ruins in this and similar images do not register a specific past, nor are they associated with the present or future. What they help construct is a breakdown between private and public spaces. Ruins in Beijing are places that belong to everyone and to no-one. They belong to no-one because the breakdown between private and public space does not generate a new kind of space. Captured by artists, their images represent ‘non-spaces’ outside normal life.

The breakdown of the conventional spatial dichotomy between private and public spaces is linked to the breakdown of a conventional temporal scheme. The contemporaneity of these ruin-related art projects should be distinguished from the concept of the present, conceived as an intermediary, transitional stage between the past and the future. As the subject of artistic representations, ruins break the logic of historical continuity, as time simply vanishes in these black holes. The past of these sites has been destroyed and no-one knows their future; they are simply identified as ‘demolition sites’.

The concept of *demolition* is deeply troubling, because it justifies destruction but does not guarantee construction. Demolition becomes distinction when a promised construction is never realised, or when an act of destruction is so enormous that no construction can ever justify the human sacrifice it has entailed. No single destruction in human history is more monstrous than the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. But the tragic event — the bomb wiped out almost an entire city and its population within a few minutes — has been rationalised as a victory of modern science, and democracy over autocracy and evil. Both the degree of violence and the effort to justify it have propelled artists around the world to expose the bombing’s moral fallacy. Nalini Malani’s video installation *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* 1998–99 (Queensland Art Gallery Collection) again takes the nuclear mushroom cloud of Hiroshima as a central figure. We can trace the suffering human images in this work back to her 1980–81 *Hieroglyphs*, Lohar Chawl. Deeply interested in the phenomenon of shadow, she transforms these images in the video into animated figures undergoing gradual disintegration. Although the bombing of Hiroshima took place more than half a century ago, it resurfaces in our contemporary consciousness whenever the memory of it is brought back with new force. Like Song Dong’s *Breathing*, Malani’s *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* realises contemporaneity through rediscovering and refashioning memories: the work forces the viewer once again to face ‘ground zero’ — a traumatic moment when nothing is left from the past, and nothing is imaginable for the future.

Nalini Malani

*India b. 1948  Remembering Toba Tek Singh*

CONTEMPORANEITY AS INTERNALISATION –
AN INTERPRETATIVE STRATEGY

It is a truism that the course of contemporary art is inevitably affected by external factors, among which social change looms large. The recent development of Chinese art offers perhaps the most dramatic evidence for such causality: not long ago this art was restricted to Communist propaganda posters and Mao's portraits, but now young experimental Chinese artists travel to every major exhibition in the world from Venice to Havana with government-issued passports. From a sociological point of view, this startling transformation is itself part of a broad transformation of Chinese society brought about by Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and open-door policy: one can trace the 'social changes' in Chinese art step by step from the late 1970s, when these reforms were first put into practice.

To summarise some basic facts: unofficial art societies and exhibitions appeared in 1979, followed by a nationwide 'avant-garde' movement in the middle to late 1980s. The 1980s saw the emergence of commercial galleries and private museums of experimental art — a radical branch of contemporary art that self-consciously challenges official, academic and popular art with its cutting-edge mediums and controversial subjects. Independent curators and art critics played increasing roles in advocating this art, and the experimental artists themselves were rapidly internationalised. Some artists emigrated abroad and gained fame there; others remained local while cultivating global ties. Numerous books and magazines on contemporary art have been published over the past twenty years, and many experimental exhibitions have been staged in all sorts of public and non-public spaces. Clashes between the avant-gardes and political authorities have never ceased. But to many observers, two government-sponsored contemporary art exhibitions during the past two years — the 2000 Shanghai Biennale and the 2001 'Living in Time' exhibition in Berlin — reflect a new level of normalisation of international-style contemporary art in China.

The close relationship between contemporary Chinese art and the country's sweeping transformation has encouraged the compilation of a macro history of this art, which interprets the contemporaneity of artists and art works against large social and political movements. Taking a textual form and largely reflecting an academic interest, this historical narrative contributes to our knowledge of contemporary art by documenting specific conditions and stimuli for art creation in a Communist country, which is nevertheless attracting numerous overseas investors as well as a growing number of international curators. On the other hand, this macro narrative has little impact on the curators, as they rarely select artists and works based on a historical textbook, but are guided, often spontaneously and intuitively — by what they find new and compelling in visual forms. Artists not only respond to such interest and judgment, but are also stimulated — again spontaneously and intuitively — by their ever-changing environment. From this approach, if the contemporaneity of contemporary Asian art has anything to do with social change, such change cannot remain simply an external frame, but must be internalised as intrinsic features and qualities of specific works and art projects. This leads me back to a proposal made at the beginning of this essay: that contemporaneity must be recognised as a particular artistic/theoretical construct, which self-consciously reflects upon the conditions and limitations of the present. Now I can further propose that contemporaneity, as such, results from the artist's internalisation of complex contextual factors; to locate contemporaneity in art is to discover the logic of such internalisation. This interpretative strategy discords the overall framework of a macro history of contemporary art, but forges micro narratives that emphasise artists' individual responses to common social problems. My earlier discussion of various counter-monuments, anti-monuments, and ruin images provides individual examples of such narratives as sites of contemporaneity. These examples also indicate the possibility of a more general mapping of contemporaneity.
On a more abstract level, commonsensical temporality and geography is contested. Nam June Paik’s TV clock 1963/1969, for example, consists of eighteen televisions in a half-circle, each showing the moving hands of a clock. The mismatch between the television-turned-chorographers and the hourly divisions of a clock generates confusion, subtly subverting the received standard of temporal measurement. If Paik bestows the television set with a particular subjectivity in his many installations, Michael Ming Hong Lin’s bold floral patterns are dematerialised, pervasive images freely traversing the walls and ceilings of any interior space. Retaining a strong folk look and flavour, these patterns increase their visual impact when they transform a Rococo palace or a modern exhibition hall into a new, hybrid appearance. Not only images, but art materials themselves can also signify identity. To Heri Dono, for example, multimedia art has a different meaning in the East than in the West:

Artists in Europe and America are exploring multi-media and computer technology. Multi-media in Asian art means something different. At Cities on the Move in Helsinki, I used a toybox powered by a flame, and also the machine with the slides in the maquette, using a Chinese alarm clock for its mechanical system. This is the kind of multi-media in Asian countries.

On a more specific level, some Asian artists define the contemporaneity of their art in relation to the rapid transformation of the city: the city is contemporary and constantly challenges them towards reinvention. With its urban ruins as well as its new skyscrapers, the city attracts artists whose ambition and superficiality stimulates escalated novelty in visual representation. There are also artists who determine to act locally against any form of colonial and imperial dominance. Tsang Tsou-Choi, otherwise known as the ‘King of Kowloon’, has continued inscribing calligraphic graffiti in Hong Kong’s public spaces since China took over in 1997, only altering his sites from Victoria Park to the Bank of China. While Tsang’s graffiti reveals contemporaneity through their changing locations, Desmond Kern Chi-Kung’s Tintin–space 1999 questions the meaning of Hong Kong’s changing political identity. As David Clarke observes:

[hence] the handover itself was addressed, in straightforwardly allegorical terms. Mechanical birds are represented as moving from one cage to another identical one, a clear comment on the absence of any independence for Hong Kong at the end of its colonial era.
New types of urban spaces generate new art. Urban development in China, for example, has pushed experimental artists to the city's peripheries. Although such movement is a common experience of struggling artists around the world, the specificity of a particular place inspires specific works. Some of the most compelling performance projects in contemporary Chinese art were produced in the so-called Chinese East Village, a tumbled-down residential district on Beijing’s east fringe. From 1993 to 1994, a group of immigrant artists from the provinces founded a community there. They were attracted to this garbage-filled place by its cheap housing as well as its ugliness, and conceived moving into the Village as a form of voluntary self-exile. Deriving inspiration from the Village's 'halliness' in contrast to 'heavenly' downtown Beijing, they identified themselves with the place in their works. It is in this spirit that Zhang Huan performed his now infamous 12 square meters 1994 covering his naked torso with a foul-smelling substance to attract hundreds of flies, he sat motionless for an hour in the Village's dirtiest public toilet.

These examples make it clear that any attempt for contemporaneity in art is intrinsically intertwined with the artist's identity. Although this is a common phenomenon in contemporary art in general, the issue of identity is again given extraordinary urgency in the fast changing Asian art world. Experimental artists are obsessed with depicting themselves, but a prevailing tendency is to deny explicit self-display. What is fascinating about these works is a voluntary ambiguity in self-imaging. Taken together, numerous images of self-distortion and self-defacing demonstrate an important feature of postmodern society, broadly defined, in which the traditional view of a fully integrated and unique individuality is increasingly compromised, replaced by a fragmented self that has no predetermined social or cultural significance. We find strong parallels between these images and the counter-monument, anti-monument, and ruin representations discussed above, but what is deconstructed and reconstructed here is not an external reality, but the 'self' as an internal existence.

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Endnotes
5. Private communication with the artist.