A CASE OF BEING "CONTEMPORARY": CONDITIONS, SPHERES, AND NARRATIVES OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

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Several years ago, after I gave a talk on contemporary Chinese art, I was asked how "Chinese art" could also be "contemporary." The person who asked the question obviously found these two concepts incompatible. To him, China or Chinese art was intuitively—and necessarily—situated in a time/place outside the realm of the contemporary. I pointed out the falsehood of this presumption, but also confessed that a systematic explanation was yet to be worked out to account for the creation and operation of a "local" or "national" contemporary art in today's world—not only contemporary Chinese art but also contemporary Iranian art, contemporary Indian art, contemporary Mexican art, and contemporary Algerian art—to name just a few.

To develop this explanation is the purpose of my essay. It is a case study meant to shed light on a larger issue. The direct subject of my discussion is a kind of Chinese art that self-consciously defines itself as "contemporary" (dangdai yishu in Chinese) and that is also accepted as such by curators and art critics worldwide, judging from their inclusion of this art in the many exhibitions they have organized to showcase recent developments in visual art. To be sure, many brands of "Chinese art" are produced today, but those in traditional mediums and styles (whether literati ink landscape or realist oil portraiture) are not conceived—or do their creators label them—as dangdai yishu. "Contemporary art" in Chinese thus does not pertain to what is here and now, but refers to an intentional artistic/theoretical construct that asserts a particular temporality and spatiality for itself. The first step of my study is therefore to map such temporality and spatiality in terms of art medium, subject matter, exhibition, and circulation, and to trace the people and institutions involved in its creation and promotion. This initial investigation leads me to define certain general spheres for the production, exhibition, and collection of contemporary Chinese art, and to propose a model for interpreting this art in its various contemporary contexts.

The need for a new interpretation of contemporary Chinese art naturally arises from dissatisfaction with earlier interpretations, which have often approached this art (and, in a broader sense, any contemporary art from the so-called second and third worlds) either exclusively in its domestic context or as a straightforward manifestation of globalization. The first approach follows a traditional art historical narrative defined by nations. The second privileges a totalizing, global perspective that stymies local angles of observation. To this end, even the notion of a "local" contemporary art already implies this dilemma and demands reconsideration. Deconstructing the global/local dichotomy is a vital component of the new understanding of contemporary Chinese art I am pursuing. In this essay, I argue that contemporary Chinese art is simultaneously constructed in different yet interrelated spaces, and that it subtly changes its meaning when artists and curators (or their works) traverse and interact with these spaces. Tracing such permutation enables us to develop a spatial model for contemporary Chinese art. This model further helps us interpret "international contemporary art" in today's world, which encompasses various "local" or "national" brands of contemporary art, as a unified field of presentation and representation. Generally speaking, instead of assuming that this type of contemporary art is linked with Modern (and Postmodern) art in a linear, temporal fashion and within a self-sustaining cultural system, this interpretative model emphasizes heterogeneity and multiplicity in art production, as well as the creativity of a new kind of artist, who creates contemporary art through simultaneously constructing his or her local identity and serving a global audience.

A "CONTEMPORARY" TURN IN CHINESE ART

The Chinese art critic Lü Peng is the main author of two comprehensive introductions to new Chinese art (also known as avant-garde or experimental art), which emerged after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The first book, which he coauthored with Yi Dan and published in 1992, is A History of Modern

The change in the titles from "modern" (xiandai) to "contemporary" (dangdai) was no accident. It is symptomatic of a general (but so far unnoticed) shift in the Chinese art world from the 1980s to the 1990s, which I call a "contemporary turn." Simply put, throughout the 1980s, Chinese avant-garde artists and art critics envisioned themselves as participants in a delayed modernization movement, which aimed to reintroduce humanism and the idea of social progress into the nation's political consciousness. From the 1990s onward, however, many of them abandoned, or at least distanced themselves, from this collective undertaking. Looking back at Chinese avant-garde art of the 1980s, some of its original advocates contrasted that exhilarating but chaotic era with the much more practical and diffuse period following it. According to Li Xianting, a major voice of new Chinese art in both the 1980s and 1990s, artists of the 1980s "believed in the possibility of applying modern Western aesthetics and philosophy as a means of revitalizing Chinese culture." Starting from the early 1990s, however, many of them turned "against heroism, idealism, and the yearning for metaphysical transcendence that characterized the '85 New Wave movement." Other critics and curators share this view and have used "Modern" and "contemporary" to encapsulate the many differences between these two periods. For instance, they wrote books and articles in the 1980s to promote "Modern," and titled the enormous exhibition that concluded the '85 New Wave: "A Grand Exhibition of Modern Art" ("Xiandai meishu dazhan"). In contrast, many books, art journals, and exhibitions since the early 1990s have used "contemporary art" in their titles.

Underlying this change was a major shift in conceptualizing new Chinese art over the past twenty-five years. Most important, the two terms indicate two different ways to contextualize this art, one temporal and diachronic, the other spatial and synchronic. When avant-garde Chinese artists and critics called themselves "modern" in the 1980s, they identified themselves, first of all, as participants in a historical movement that had been interrupted in China by communist rule. Lu Peng and Yi Dan thus opened A History of Modern Chinese Art: 1979–1989 with a passionate introduction, linking new Chinese art to the May Fourth movement that started in 1919. In their view, although this early twentieth-century "cultural revolution" had the correct goal of bringing China into a modern era of democracy and science, its heavy emphasis on the social function of art and literature finally led to an extreme pragmatism, as realism willingly turned itself into political symbolism in the 1960s and 1970s to assist a "proletarian dictatorship." To regain the spirit of a genuine cultural revolution, therefore, their introduction exhorted "modern artists" of the 1980s to not only uphold humanism as their fundamental ideology, but to also take upon themselves the role of cultural critic, "reexamining the relationship between art and society, religion, and philosophy in all possible ways." Similar claims characterize many other writings from that period. In contrast to such spirited discussion of "modern art" in the 1980s, no particular discourse has qualitied 1990s art as "contemporary," even though the term has gained wide currency among Chinese artists and critics. What the term indicated in the early 1990s was, above all, a sense of rupture and demarcation—the end of an era as well as the kind of historical thinking associated with it. This meaning is made clear in Li Xianting's writing cited above. But as veterans of the 1980s art movement, Li and his colleagues perceived the art of the new era pessimistically as visual forms without genuine historical, political, and social engagement. Other writers explained the artists' break with history and ideology in terms of China's changing political situation. For example, Chang Tsong-zung, who sponsored and coorganized the first major international exhibition of contemporary Chinese art in 1993, attributed this change to the ill-fated June Fourth movement (the prodemocratic demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989). He observes: "In shock, 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 in Tian'anmen." Applying this understanding to visual analysis, he pointed out that two major styles in post-1989 Chinese art—Cynical Realism and Political Pop—both translated idealism into sarcasm.

Chang's observation has a broader significance in alluding to a general pattern that distinguishes the development of postwar Chinese art from that of the West. It is a "pattern of rupture" caused by violent intrusions of sociopolitical events such as the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen incident. The result has been a series of deep ruptures as a general historical/psychological condition for artistic and intellectual creativity. Each rupture has forced artists and intellectuals to reevaluate and reorient themselves. Instead of returning to a prior time/space, the projects they have developed after each rupture often testify to a different set of parameters and are governed by different temporality and spatiality.

This pattern of response explains the sudden change in artists' attitudes after 1989, and also enables us to see 1980s "modern art" and 1990s "contemporary art" not as two consecutive trends, but as disconnected endeavors conceived in separate temporal/spatial schemes. Earlier I mentioned that avant-garde artists

and critics of the 1980s linked themselves with the May Fourth movement, a cultural movement that aimed to transform China based on a Western, Enlightenment model. It is therefore not surprising that these artists and critics also developed a strong desire for cosmopolitanism and eagerly sought inspirations in Western Modern art, art theory, and philosophy. This desire became both the cause and the result of an “information explosion” in the 1980s. From the start of the decade, all sorts of “decadent” Western art forbidden during the Cultural Revolution was introduced to China through reproductions and exhibitions; hundreds of theoretical works, from authors such as Heinrich Wölflin to Ernst Gombrich, were translated and published in a short period. These images and texts aroused enormous interest among younger artists and greatly inspired their work. It was as if a century-long development of Modern art was simultaneously restaged in China. The chronology and internal logic of this Western tradition became less important; what counted most was its diverse content as visual and intellectual stimuli for a hungry audience. Thus, styles and theories that had long become past history in the West (such as surrealism or Wölflin’s categorization of artistic styles) were used by Chinese artists as their direct models. The meaning of their works as “Modern art” was located, therefore, not in the original historical significance of the styles and ideas, but in the transference of these styles and ideas to a different time/place.

Like any transference, this dislocation of Modern art was based on the idea of precedents. Although separated by time and historical experience, Chinese artists of the 1980s saw themselves as direct followers of great modern philosophers and artists in the West. A historian of Western contemporary art may be shocked to find that in Lü Peng and Yi Dan’s A History of Modern Chinese Art: 1979–1989, the most influential figures on Chinese artists in the 1980s were, in fact, “Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Albert Camus, and T. S. Eliot.” But it makes perfect sense if we understand these artists’ longing to rediscover their modernist roots. This situation changed completely after 1989. These grand names suddenly became infinitely remote, and few Chinese artists, if any, continued to seek guidance from them. Rather, the sharp historical gap created by the Tiananmen incident distanced them from the previous era, enabling them to develop a radically different relationship with history and with the surrounding world. In this process, they also disengaged themselves from yundong, the Chinese term for large-scale political, ideological, or artistic “campaigns” or “movements.”

Although seldom analyzed by historians and sociologists, yundong had been one of the most fundamental concepts and technologies in modern Chinese political culture until the 1990s. This was especially true for the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. Upon ascension to power, the Chinese Communist Party mobilized various yundong to realize both short and long-term projects, and to unify the “revolutionary masses” against internal and external enemies. Three major characteristics of a yundong include a definite and often concrete political agenda, a propaganda machine that helps define and spread this agenda, and an organization that helps forge a cohesive “front” among participants. Yundong became the norm. It is therefore not surprising that a yundong mindset continued to control artists’ ways of thinking even after the Cultural Revolution had ended. The persistence of a yundong mentality is clearly seen in 1980s avant-garde art: while attacking official ideology and art policies, the advocates of this art tried hard to galvanize experimental artists into a unified front and to develop this art into an organized “movement.” (In fact, they called their collective activities a yundong.)

It took a hit as hard as the Tiananmen tragedy to disengage Chinese artists from this yundong mentality. Almost overnight, they were transformed from soldiers in a heroic struggle into lone individuals facing an alien world. The unfamiliarity of the world in the early 1990s, however, had less to do with the Tiananmen incident as with two simultaneous, contemporary happenings. First, China had now entered a new stage in a profound socioeconomic transformation. Beginning in the late 1970s, a new generation of Chinese leaders led by Deng Xiaoping had initiated a series of socioeconomic reforms, but the consequences of these reforms were fully felt only in the 1990s. Major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai were completely reshaped. Numerous private and joint-ventured, including private-owned, commercial art galleries had appeared. Educated young men and women moved from job to job in pursuing personal well-being, and a large “floating population” entered metropolitan centers from the countryside to look for work and better living conditions. As I will discuss below, many changes in 1990s art were related to this larger picture.

Second, China also entered a new stage of globalization. If 1980s “modern art” was predominately a domestic movement closely linked with the country’s internal political situation at the time, “contemporary art” since the 1990s has unfolded across multiple geographical, political, and cultural spheres. Consequently, my discussion will now turn to the three most important spheres of this art, which overlap but do not constitute a coherent framework for a continuous narrative. These are: (1) China’s domestic art spaces, (2) the global network of a multinational contemporary art, and (3) individualized linkages between these two spheres created by independent artists and curators.
THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

Contemporary Art as a Domestic Avant-Garde

In the domestic sphere, the term "contemporary art" conveys a strong sense of avant-gardism and signifies a range of experiments that aspire to challenge established art institutions, systems, and forms. Over the past ten to fifteen years, most such experimentation has been conducted in three areas: art medium, subject, and exhibition.14

A simple but powerful strategy employed by many avant-garde Chinese artists to make their works explicitly "contemporary" is to subvert traditional art mediums. The trend of subverting painting emerged in the 1980s. (Before this, independent artists, even the most radical ones, still worked in the domains of painting and sculpture). But it was only from the mid-1990s onward that new art forms, such as installation, performance, site-specific art, and multimedia art, prevailed. An increasing number of younger artists abandoned their former training in traditional or Western painting, or only made paintings privately to finance their more adventurous but less marketable art experiments. One can draw interesting parallels between them and an earlier generation of Westernized Chinese artists, who abandoned the traditional Chinese brush for the "Modern" medium of oil painting. But if those artists in the early twentieth century chose between different types of painting, their successors in the present choose whether to abandon painting altogether.

As I will discuss in the following section, new, experimental art forms provide contemporary Chinese artists with an "international language." Inside China, however, these forms have served to forge an independent field of art production, exhibition, and criticism outside official and academic art. In denouncing painting, artists can effectively establish an "outside" position for themselves, because what they reject is not just a particular art form or medium, but an entire art system, including education, exhibition, publication, and employment. Such a break is sometimes related to an artist's political identity. But it can also be a relatively independent artistic decision, as these artists find the new art forms both liberating and challenging. On this level of individual experimentation these artists negotiate with painting in different ways: some of them squarely reject painting; others subvert painting and calligraphy from within; still others reframe painting as components of installation or performance.

Also in the domestic sphere, contemporary Chinese artists have distinguished themselves through developing site-specific projects and "experimental exhibitions." One type of site-specific project can be called a countermonument or antimonument. Set in important political spaces such as the Great Wall or Tiananmen Square, a countermonument or antimonument transforms such space into a stage for individual expression. Pursuit of contemporaneity has also given rise to many "ruin images," which comment on or interact with the drastic transformation of the Chinese city. A striking aspect of a major Chinese metropolis like Beijing or Shanghai over the past ten to fifteen years has been the never ending destruction and construction that goes on there. This situation furnishes both the context and the content of a large group of works that represent "demolition sites" or take place in such locations. I have discussed elsewhere some chief characteristics of these images and site-specific projects, especially the skewed temporality and spatiality contained in them.15 A demolition site in real life is a place that belongs to everyone and to no one. It belongs to no one because the breakdown it effects between private and public space does not generate a new space. Captured by contemporary artists, a demolition site signifies a kind of "nonspace" outside normal life. Its suspended spatiality is further linked to its suspended temporality. The contemporaneity of these ruin-related projects should be distinguished from the concept of the present, conceived as an intermediary, transitional stage between past and future. As the
subject of contemporary art, demolition sites break the logic of historical continuity, as “time” simply vanishes in these “black holes.” The past of these places has been destroyed and few people know their future. Unlike war ruins, however, demolition sites inspire not only anxiety but also hope.

Some artists and curators have staged exhibitions at demolition sites. In so doing they have identified their projects as “experimental exhibitions,” which shift the focus of experimentation from the content of an exhibition to the exhibition itself: its site, form, and social function. These issues loom large in present-day China because of an intensified conflict between a rapidly developing, aggressively active contemporary art and a backward official system of exhibition. Since the late 1990s, independent curators and artists have tried to discover new exhibition spaces and to transform old exhibition spaces into venues for contemporary art. Most significantly, they have organized a considerable number of contemporary art exhibitions that have taken place in versatile, nonexhibition spaces, bringing works of contemporary art to the public in a dynamic, guerilla fashion. That many such site-specific exhibitions have used commercial spaces reflects the curators’ interest in mass commercial culture, which in their view has become a major force in contemporary Chinese society. While affiliating contemporary art with this culture, their exhibitions have also provided channels for artists to comment on it.

Decontextualization as Contemporaneity

The close relationship between the development of contemporary Chinese art and China’s sweeping transformation has encouraged the compilation of a kind of macro history, which interprets this art in light of domestic social and political movements. This history, however, fails to document or explain the global presence of contemporary Chinese art and its growing contribution to a burgeoning international contemporary art. We cannot simply expand the domestic context of contemporary Chinese art into a global one, because different forces and present different problems govern these two spheres. Neither can we study contemporary Chinese art in either sphere in complete isolation. Our task, I propose, is to observe and analyze how this art negotiates with these two spheres and how it changes its roles and aims in responding to different spaces and audiences.

Most important, as part of an international contemporary art, the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and contemporary China becomes submerged. Such decontextualization is coupled with a recontextualization of this art in a different socioeconomic network. The beginning of this twofold process of decontextualization and recontextualization can be dated precisely to the early 1990s, when contemporary Chinese artists first appeared in the Forty-fifth Venice Biennale and were featured in mainstream Western art magazines. Around the same time, contemporary Chinese art became a global commodity, promoted by transnational commercial galleries and collected by foreign collectors and museums. Direct ties between Chinese artists and Western art institutions were then forged both inside and outside China, as international curators flocked to the country to search for new talent, and as Chinese artists increasingly participated in international exhibitions and workshops; some of them emigrated abroad for good.

These facts are well known and need little elaboration, but their impact on the meaning of contemporary Chinese art remains a question. In other words, the recontextualization of this art should be thought of as a reconstruction of its definition and identity. While the term “contemporary Chinese art” remains the same, its purposes and strategies have undergone crucial changes. On the most basic level, displacement and translation already alter a work’s significance. For example, I discussed earlier how in China, new art forms such as installation, performance, and site-specific art convey a strong social message to subvert established norms. This significance largely disappears when these works are displayed in international exhibitions (such as the many biennials and triennials staged extravagantly around the world) that feature endless installations and multimedia works. Contemporary artists from China contribute to these events, first of all, through immersing themselves in the kind of “international contemporary art” that these transnational exhibitions promote. Unlike oil and ink paintings, installation, performance, and multimedia art defy a rigid cultural identity. What they provide to Chinese artists on these occasions is an “international language,” which not only confirms their own contemporaneity but also allows them to incorporate indigenous art forms, materials, and expression into contemporary art. In so doing, they can maintain their identity as Chinese artists within international contemporary art.

Such immersion inspires creativity as well as simplification and misinterpretation. On the one hand, some of the most compelling works of contemporary Chinese art have been created in the global sphere, where they reflect on current international and intercultural issues through genuine artistic innovation. On the other hand, international art exhibitions encourage the tendency to reduce local tradition into ready-made symbols and citations. The wide circulation of contemporary Chinese art brings contemporary Chinese art to a global audience, but such circulation also removes this art from its roots and erases its original, historical significance. On the one hand, the new context challenges Chinese artists to contend with comparisons to the best contemporary artists
around the world. On the other hand, they can seldom avoid the audience's expectation to find Chineseess in exotic, self-orientalizing forms.

The advantage and disadvantage of such decontextualization and recontextualization is best demonstrated by the changing meaning of Cynical Realism and Political Pop, two contemporary Chinese art styles that are best known in the West. As discussed earlier, both styles were invented in the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident to express, among other things, artists' disillusionment with their own political engagement. But when paintings in these two styles appeared in a series of international exhibitions in the early 1990s (including the Forty-fifth Venice Biennale, the "China Avant-Garde" exhibition in Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt, and "China's New Art, Post-1989" in Hong Kong, all organized in 1993), they were immediately taken as representatives of an "underground" or "dissident" art under a communist regime. Ironically, such interpretation based on a Cold War logic led to the artists' commercial success and changed their status in their home country. Soon thereafter, some of these artists built large villas outside the Chinese capital to live an affluent lifestyle in a tightly guarded environment, painting largely for an unfamiliar, overseas audience.

On a methodological level, the decontextualization and recontextualization of contemporary Chinese art implies a shift in interpretation from historical context to broad theoretical implication that can be applied to works created anywhere. The numerous self-portraits by contemporary Chinese artists lend themselves to both types of interpretation. Historically, these images signify a desire to reconstruct the self through visual representation. This desire comes from an absence: self-portraiture disappeared entirely in China during the Cultural Revolution. In a period when every action and thought had to be directed by a collective ideology, self-portraiture was naturally identified with bourgeois self-indulgence and was therefore counterrevolutionary. On the other hand, the art of portraiture was given an exaggerated importance by reducing it to the mass production of the image of one man.

The desire to represent the self resurfaced after the Cultural Revolution was over. But the form and logic of these representations have been conditioned by both the country's recent past and present. Instead of representing one's personal appearance and emotional state, a more common tendency among contemporary Chinese artists has been a conscious denial of explicit self-display. Numerous "self-portraits" by these artists demonstrate a voluntary ambiguity in their self-images, as if they felt that the best way to realize their individuality was to make themselves simultaneously visible and invisible. These ambiguous, fragmentary images express their anxiety, frustration, and dilemmas in a rapidly changing society, and are therefore still about the authenticity of the self. Displayed in an international exhibition, however, these images are given a broad rhetorical significance related to a general redefinition of the self in the contemporary world, and are used to exemplify how in our time the traditional view of a fully integrated, unique, and distinctive individuality has been increasingly compromised, causing the fragmentation of the self and decline in the belief that the individual is a legitimate social reality.19

Artists as Mediators of Contemporaneity

This section focuses on the third sphere of contemporary Chinese art, comprising individualized spaces and channels generated by artists and curators through their independent projects and physical movement. Although the domestic and global spheres of contemporary Chinese art are connected on the institutional level, either through a transnational commercial network or through government-sponsored art exhibitions, the main linkage between the two spaces, I would suggest, is provided by contemporary Chinese artists themselves. They thus function not only as creators of contemporary Chinese art but also as mediators between the multiple identities of this art. Many of these artists have become world travelers in the past decade. Some of them have returned to China after spending several years abroad. Others maintain a residence in New York or Paris but have become increasingly involved in domestic exhibitions. The majority of artists never officially emigrate, but it is not unusual for them to spend several months a year outside China, traveling from one exhibition to another. Some thoughtful artists have created site-specific works for locations outside China, or have expressed their experience as global travelers in their works.20

Because of the unsystematic nature of such movement and activity, it is difficult to generalize about them. The channels opened up by these activities remain highly fluid and flexible. The "sphere" that they constitute vaguely encompasses the domestic and international spaces of contemporary Chinese art, but again in an unsystematic and undefined way. Despite its elusiveness, however, this sphere is most intimately connected with individual artistic innovation, the result of his or her internalization of broad social and cultural issues. This recognition demands close analyses of individual artists and their works. Unlike traditional "biographical" studies in art history, however, such analyses must show how contemporaneity is constructed through an artist's personal engagement with the domestic and global spheres.

Many Chinese artists can and should be discussed this way. My example here is Zhang Dali, the only graffiti artist in Beijing and certainly the most famous graffiti artist there in the 1990s.21 Like many other contemporary Chinese art-
ists, his life is filled with unexpected turns. To make a long story short, he grew up in northeast China and studied traditional painting at a top art school in Beijing. He graduated in 1987 and then emigrated to Italy in 1989, after the prodemocratic student movement in Tiananmen Square ended in bloodshed that year. In Italy he first made Oriental-style commercial paintings for a living, but later became a spray-can graffiti artist and forged the image of a bald head as his trademark. He continued to paint the same head after moving back to China in 1995, and by 1998 he had sprayed more than two thousand such images all over Beijing. These images, which he created secretly at night, eventually became the focus of a public controversy and were widely discussed in Beijing's newspapers and magazines. It was only then that Zhang Dali revealed his identity as the creator of these images. In one interview he explained his art: “This head is a condensation of my own likeness as an individual. It represents me to communicate with this city. I want to know everything about this city—its state of being, its transformation, its structure. I call this project Dialogue.”

Zhang Dali’s basic technique to develop such “dialogue” was to fill a half-demolished, empty house with his own image(s). He was therefore able to “reclaim” an abandoned site, however temporarily. The locations he selected for such a performance/photograph project always highlighted certain contrasts between different political identities and social spaces. Sometimes he juxtaposed the graffiti head with an official monument; other times he juxtaposed a preserved traditional building (a palace) with a half-demolished one (an ordinary residence). But most of the time he contrasted urban destruction and construction. This mode is forcefully demonstrated in this 1998 performance/photograph. In the foreground of the picture, standing amid scattered garbage, are some broken walls as the remnants of a demolished traditional house, on which Zhang Dali has sprayed a row of his famous heads. Two huge modern buildings rise behind this wasteland. Still surrounded by scaffolding, one of them already advertises itself as the future “Prime Tower” and offers the telephone number of its sales department.

Many aspects of Zhang Dali’s artistic experiments in the 1990s are related to the notion of contemporaneity. These aspects include art medium and form (he abandoned painting in favor of performance, site-specific installation, and photography); social function and audience (his graffiti images became part of Beijing’s public space, encountered by Beijing residents everyday); and identity. Regarding this last aspect, by inscribing his own image on old Beijing houses, Zhang Dali defined a specific space around which he could construct his identity as a “local artist” opposed to globalization and commercialization. But this identity contradicted his other identity as an “international artist” working for a global audience. (Since 1999, his photos have been shown in many art exhibitions outside China and collected by foreign collectors and institutions.) We should not simply consider such contradiction negatively. As I have suggested, the tensions between various spheres of contemporary Chinese art problematize straightforward answers to complex problems. Partly responding to the commercialization of his “graffiti” images, Zhang Dali has developed a new project in recent years, making sculptures directly from the bodies and faces of migrant workers from the countryside—people who are rebuilding Beijing but who remain anonymous, deprived laborers in the Chinese capital.

Zhang Dali’s example supports one of my methodological proposals, that a general sociological contextualization does not automatically reveal the contemporaneity of contemporary Chinese art. If such contemporaneity has anything to do with China’s social transformation and globalization, these external factors must be internalized as intrinsic features, qualities, intentions, and visual effects of specific art projects. This interpretative strategy discourages the broad reduction of contemporary Chinese art to either its domestic or global contexts, but encourages us to forge micronarratives that emphasize artists’ individual responses to common social problems.
CODA: CONTEMPORANEITY AS INTENSIFICATION

In a seminar held in Beijing in 1999, a well-known European curator confessed that he actually knew little about the history of contemporary Chinese art; but he nevertheless decided to include some twenty young Chinese artists in his forthcoming exhibition because he found "the intensity of creative energy in their works irresistible." I told him that although I did know something about the cultural background and sociopolitical circumstances of this art, I was attracted to contemporary Chinese art for exactly the same reason. I then wondered what this "intensity of creative energy" actually meant—a feeling shared by two observers with very different backgrounds and experiences that seemed to capture the essence of new Chinese art at that moment.

If intensity results from intensification, then contemporary Chinese art is a consequence of a double intensification. In other words, this art not only responds to China's startling transformation over the past ten to fifteen years, but further enhances the feeling of speed, anxiety, and theatricality inherent in this external transformation through artistic representation. The strength of this art certainly does not depend upon the solitary perfection of individual masters over a prolonged time span. What makes it "irresistible" is the speed and depth of the artists' internalization of the sweeping changes around them—changes that in a short period have altered Chinese cities and the country's economic structure, transformed people's lifestyles and self-identities, and made China a major economic power in the world. Similar transformations took place years ago in other parts of the world; China's ambition is to accomplish a century of development in the West in one or two decades. The same desire and urgency, often combined with self-doubt and uncertainty, is found in many works created by contemporary Chinese artists. As a result, many of these works strike viewers as containing something "real" and raw: ambition, rage, struggle, yearning, hope. The rapidly changing art medium, style, and subject further generate a sense of constant happening. All these characteristics contribute to a particular kind of contemporaneity in art, which is often lacking in works produced in peaceful, "normal," and more individualized societies.

His observation, however, also implies a predicament: as China's explosive development eventually slows down and as contemporary Chinese art is eventually "normalized" to become a routine aspect of social life, the "intensity of creative energy" in this art will diminish. From such a historical perspective, therefore, the kind of contemporaneity described in this essay can only be a momentary quality of contemporary Chinese art. But this only proves that instantaneity and simultaneity are inseparable from the conception of contemporaneity, which inevitably involves the condensation of time.

NOTES

1. The need to develop a "polycentric perspective to describe a polycentric situation" in studying industrial relationships is addressed in Kristensen and Zeitlin, Local Players in Global Games, 1–23.
2. I pursue this understanding not only through research and writing but also through actual intervention, mainly organizing exhibitions and discussions in multiple geographical and cultural spheres. For example, I have organized several exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art outside China. Some of these exhibitions introduced this art to a global audience (e.g., "Transience: Experimental Chinese Art at the End of the Twentieth Century" and "Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China"). Others focused on particular issues such as the meaning of art media, cross-cultural communication, contemporary aesthetics, or censorship (for example, "Cancled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China," "Visual Performance: Five New-media Artists from Asia," "Intersection: Contemporary Photography and Oil Painting from China," and "About Beauty"). My three major exhibitions in China have taken place in different spaces, including a large public museum (the First Guangzhou Triennial), a nonexhibition space ("Tui-Transfiguration"), and a commercial gallery ("Tobacco Project: Shanghai").
3. For a brief discussion of the applications of these two terms to contemporary Chinese art, see Wu, "Introduction," 11–12. Here I use them interchangeably in referring to the kind of new Chinese art discussed in this essay.
4. For example, Gao Minglu, a key organizer of the avant-garde movement in the 1980s, describes this movement in humanist terms. See his Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi.
6. Li, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art." For a short introduction to the '85 New Wave movement (85 Yishu xincha) and its political context, see Wu, Transience, 17–22. For a detailed documentation and analysis of this movement, see Gao, Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi.
7. This exhibition is known in English as "China/Avant Garde," a name fabricated later for the convenience of a foreign readership. For an introduction to the exhibition, see Lu and Yi, Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi, 325–53.
8. As in the West, these two terms are often used interchangeably by Chinese artists and critics. But in China, such mixed uses became especially frequent from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Toward the mid- and late 1990s, however, "contemporary art" clearly became the term for new Chinese art.
9. Lu and Yi, Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi, 2–4; quotation from 4.
10. A representative book is Lang Shaojun's A Discussion of Chinese Modern Art, which starts from the introduction of Western art to China and ends with the '85 Art New Wave.
11 Entitled “China’s New Art, Post-1989,” this show opened in January 1993 in Hong Kong and subsequently traveled throughout the world for several years.

12 Chang Tsong-zung, “Into the Nineties,” in Chang, China’s New Art, Post-1989, i–vii; quotation from i.

13 Li and Yi, Zhongguo xian dai yishu shi, 4.

14 I discuss such domestic experimentations in greater detail in “Contemporaneity in Contemporary Chinese Art,” forthcoming.

15 See Wu, Transience, 79–126.

16 I have discussed “experimental exhibitions” in a number of places, including Exhibiting Experimental Art in China; “Experimental Exhibitions of the 1990s”; and “Tut-Transfiguration.”

17 Fourteen Chinese artists participated in this Venice Biennale, including Wang Guan-gyi, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Xu Bing, Liu Wei, Yu Hong, Feng Mengbo, Yu Youhan, Li Shan, Wang Zhiwei, Ding Yi, Sun Lang, and Song Haidong. For introductions to contemporary Chinese art in mainstream art journals in the West, see Chan, “Ten Years of the Chinese Avant-Garde”; and Solomon, “Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China.”

18 Some of these works are created by, among others, Xu Bing, Cai Guoqiang, Huang Yongbing, Chen Zhen, and Wenda Gu.

19 One such exhibition was “Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China,” which I co-curated in New York (International Center for Photography) and Chicago (Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago). It included a section entitled “Reimagining the Self.”

20 One example is the Beijing artist Yin Xiuzhen, who has created a series of “suitcases” with fabric, representing a dozen or so cities around the world where she has shown her work. Ironically, all these miniature cities look alike. Instead of representing reality, here Yin expresses her experience as a global traveler.

21 For Zhang’s works, see Borysevicz, Zhang Da Ji. For a discussion of his site-specific project called Dialogue, see Wu, “Zhang Da Ji’s Dialogue.”

22 Leng Ling, Shi wo [It’s me], 168.