Confronting History in the Contemporary: An Interview with Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng and Feng Boyi

In the past few years, large-scale events featuring an international assembly of artists have enjoyed something of a boom. While well-established European events like the Venice Biennale, Documenta and Art Basel occupy pre- eminent positions on the world stage, biennales in Chinese cities like Shanghai and Chengdu are relative newcomers to the contemporary art scene. This month, Guangzhou inaugurates its own triennial with ‘Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art 1990-2000’ at the Guangdong Museum of Art (GDMA).

As viewers, we look at the art on display, but do we really give much thought to how such events are brought to fruition? In a series of candid conversations, three members of the curatorial committee discuss issues concerning the conceptualization of the Triennial, and the curatorial and functional aspects of mounting such an exhibition. For Orientations, Huang Yin spoke to chief curator Wu Hung and GDMA director Wang Huangsheng; and Bruce Doar to noted independent Feng Boyi.

Orientations: How and when did you come up with the idea of organizing a sequential event like the Triennial in Guangzhou?

Wang Huangsheng: It was something we had been thinking about for some years. From its inception in 1997, the GDMA has been concerned with the promotion of contemporary art. Since then we’ve been looking into the viability of organizing a contemporary art event which was both long-standing and representative of the museum as a cultural institution. Regardless of the form it took, there was no doubt that it would be an international event of some dimension, as the GDMA is one of the larger museums in China with a focus on this type of art.

Wu Hung: When I first visited the museum in 2000, I was very impressed by its scale. I knew that Wang had wanted to have a definitive exhibition for the museum and felt that it would be great to hold a large one there. Then there was the question of choosing from the different models of such events.

O: So how was the concept of the Triennial arrived at?

WHS: Well, we had to think of what to call this event, since Shanghai already has its Biennale; and we toyed with something along the lines of Documenta. Then after much consideration, it was decided that the museum should organize a triennial.

WH: The terms ‘biennale’ and ‘triennial’ are very popular at the moment. There are obvious models like the Shanghai Biennale where famous artists from around the world are invited. As the artists do not really have a common background, quality is important here. But I feel that it is not necessary to have an event like the others. Travelling to different cities to see similar kinds of assemblies seems quite superfluous. While we can borrow and learn from other international biennales, we cannot just lift one event and transplant it to another place – it won’t work that way.

Documenta, for example, is very successful because it has consciously kept to its own distinctive character. That’s essential for this kind of sequential exhibition; and it is for the respective curators and museums to define them so that even if the name is the same, the content is different.

Moreover, this kind of international art also needs some domestic context. Locating it in various places for different audiences is a major consideration in exploring meaning.

O: Many critics have in fact commented on this quality of ‘sameness’. The question ‘Why are there so many biennales and international exhibitions?’ has become a subject of heated debate and will, in fact, be discussed at an Asia Society seminar during the Asian Contemporary Art Week in New York. How will the Guangzhou Triennial distinguish itself from the rest of the pack?

WHS: During the process of conceptualization, this was a question which we constantly asked ourselves: were we just ‘joining the party’ or could we really accomplish something? As this was a problem which had to be thought through very carefully, it has taken many years for the project to be realized. It was not simply a case of saying ‘We want an exhibition; we’ll have an exhibition’.

The same questions were also considered two years ago at one of the preliminary events leading up to the current Documenta. It was observed that international exhibitions had become a sort of trend. As some popular artists were invited to participate in all these shows, a ‘circuit’ of sorts was rapidly emerging. After a while it seemed difficult to distinguish one event from another. It was as if the same cast of characters kept appearing.

We were finally able to put together the First Triennial because we had found a leitmotif: ‘Confronting History’ [Mòdàilǐshì]. We are not an art gallery or a run-of-the-mill exhibition space. As a museum, it is vital for us to preserve a sense of history or take a historical approach in presentation. In addition to exhibitions of contemporary material, our museum has had this particular focus. The retrospective-style show on two decades of experimental ink painting is one such example. We feel this is a distinguishing feature of our institution – the Triennial can take its cue from this.

In its fifty years of existence, the aim of Documenta has been to pay close attention to movements in contemporary culture. I’ve just returned from there, and in the current event, curated by Okwui Enwezor, art was seamlessly and comprehensively melded with cultural discourse. As ‘culture’ is to Documenta, ‘history’ should be to our Triennial.

O: On to more practical considerations – how will the Triennial be funded, as most events of this scale are supported by the municipal government?

WHS: I suppose you could say that we have our own way of doing things in China, so what may be considered a great expense here may not necessarily be seen in the same light internationally.

Of course we are not able to match the invitations other shows issue to international or overseas artists, or give them the sort of support or treatment they may receive from similar events, but we are enormously grateful for the enthusiastic response we have received from the artists themselves, as many of them are aware of the conditions in China. The support of the artistic community in China – artists, curators and sponsors – has helped to lessen the burden.

Then there is the government – once the event had become a certainty, we were able to apply for funds. We have also applied for foundation support, which was successful.

Admittedly, there are many difficulties, and we are even considering solving our problems from the root. The government must do more.

O: Whom else are you planning to have on exhibit more specifically, if anyone else you have chosen to exhibit?

Feng Boyi: China? In the case of the first Triennial, we have chosen to participate in this type of museum because it is a new subject and we have not had a chance to have a museum here, nor a triennial, which is an internationally recognized format.

WHS: What, at this stage of the museum, does it mean to be both of these things? There is no need to achieve this all at once. There will be a generation gap and last year’s show at the first Triennial was retrospective and artistic. It is inevitable.

O: What is the role of the museum as a global artefact in the art world?

WHS: What we have talked about here is the different cases of Art in the past. The role is implied. While we are not political or political art, we are desiring to spark the interest of the art world to the local art.

WHS: We hope these amorphous factors will be the key to extending the life of this exhibition and solve it with its own problems. Our approach is to make a whole discussion frame of the meaning of art today.

O: What do you consider key to understanding the role of this new event in China?
also applied for funds from charitable foundations overseas, and have had some success.

Admittedly this is an area that is still fraught with difficulties. But the whole thing must be done properly. We may even consider taking a loan if funding problems persist. Once we’ve begun, we must do it well.

O: Why was contemporary Chinese art, more specifically 1990s experimental art, chosen as the focus of the inaugural show?

Feng Boyi: Since the 1989 show at the China National Gallery in Beijing, contemporary Chinese art has made impressive advances in technique, subject-matter and market. These need to be brought together and presented in a meaningful way which highlights the 1990s trends.

WH: Wang Huangsheng and I talked about this when he attended the Museum of Modern Art workshop in New York early last year. In the case of the GDMIA, I felt that we could go slower and not rush into this type of international assembly. Instead a domestic basis could be established for contemporary art. It is important for us to understand what is contemporary Chinese art first. Maybe in the future we can have a true international show, but for the first one, we should start locally and reveal the basis and history of contemporary Chinese art.

A: During my discussions with Professor Wu, I discovered that we both shared a profound interest in Chinese experimental art of the 1990s. We felt that this was a subject worthy of a thorough overview. There is a need to examine the characteristics of experimental art, achievements, problems, and cultural implications and meanings. I noticed that whenever the 1985 New Wave movement was discussed, there was always the feeling that art from this period left behind a deep and lasting impression. The movement made an even greater impact at the 1989 exhibition in Beijing, an event that can be considered a retrospective of the 1980s. Despite the many outstanding exhibitions and artists, there has not been a complete retrospective of the 1990s. It is hoped that the first Triennal will help to fill this gap.

Our frame of reference is actually an open one; although we’ve addressed the question of China this time, it has been placed within a globalized setting to allow the international community to understand the art of China and its cultural problems.

A: What is ‘experimental art’? The term is increasingly used by Chinese critics, but it seems to mean different things to different people. In Transience and Exhibition Chinese Experimental Art in China, Professor Wu observes that it has ‘looser and broader implications’ than terms like ‘unofficial art’ or ‘avant-garde art’. While it is not associated with any specific artistic style, subject-matter or political orientation, its defining characteristic is the desire to break away from traditions like Party-sponsored official art, the art of the academy, urban visual culture and international commercial art.

WH: Personally I agree with Wu Hung’s views. It is something amorphous, but the nature or meaning of ‘experimental’ is a key to understanding the field. It opens up new territory, or is something the audience has not seen. Being experimental means breaking with tradition and starting anew. There are different methods of approach; for example one can take issue with a traditional form of expression. By challenging it, a breakthrough is achieved and a fresh frame of reference is established.

However, something that is new and distinctive is not always considered experimental — as in the case of ink painting. An innovation of technique, even though it is considered an improvement, cannot be considered experimental. Experimentation doesn’t necessarily mean this new way of doing things will naturally be successful but it is about the process of ‘trying’.

O: The inaugural Triennial is entitled ‘Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art 1990-2000’. What does the notion of reinterpretation mean in this instance?

FBY: The idea behind this overriding theme is to develop a local re-reading of the 1990s trends, and the need for a local reinterpretation springs from the clash or contradiction between global and local concerns.

WH: The Triennal’s conceptual emphasis in mind, and from our viewpoint as practitioners and students of cultural studies, reinterpretation means that we try and look at history in a new light. An important aspect of this show is to provide a more complete picture of the field during this period. It thus encompasses the views of opposing parties and attempts to give a sense of what it was like to be a bystander at the time. It is hoped this will result in a better and more complete understanding of the differences within China and of the artists, especially when they began showing abroad.

Everyone has a different way of looking at things. While one cannot say such views are right or wrong, there is a limitation perhaps to the outsider’s understanding of China. While this doesn’t mean there isn’t the right to make choices and judgements, there may be misconceptions.

WH: Reinterpretation refers to a kind of process which has to be introduced in order to lay down a foundation and establish a platform for group research and discussion. It is not about coming up with something correct or replacing one opinion with another.

We envision the project as a collective effort rather than an individual form of expression: the organizers share the understanding that Chinese experimental art in the 1990s is at once a highly significant and extremely complex phenomenon — any serious interpretation or reinterpretation must respond to both historical and methodological challenges.

The interpreter needs not only to expand research materials but also to re-examine analytical standards and approaches. It is on this basic level that we question previous interpretations, which more often than not lacked research basis, and often expressed the interpreter’s self-interest. The simultaneous introduction of this art to the West through exhibitions and publications is itself a complex phenomenon. While it helped to globalize the field, organizers and authors often had a limited knowledge of contemporary Chinese artists and the socio-cultural context of their works, and personal tastes and biases were often reflected in their promotion of the art. Even in China, experimental art has been condemned by orthodox art critics, and its supporters are divided by different viewpoints and ideological positions. There are those who oppose cultural and stylistic hybridity, an important feature of Chinese experimental art from a nationalistic stance.

O: The curatorial panel reflects the diversity of views and practices in experimental Chinese art today, Professor Wu, how was it assembled and what did each individual member bring to the project?

WH: The museum maintains an open mind, so when they first invited me to curate this show, they also asked me about the selection of curators. I concentrated on forming a panel that was small but functional. In suggesting Huang Zhuan and Feng Boyi as the two domestic curators, there were some factors which I consider very important.

This show is different from others: it is basically a retrospective, so I think the different approaches should be fairly represented on the committee. I did not want to give the impression there were one, two or three people promoting one particular approach or position and rejecting others.

Huang and Feng are both very knowledgeable, but each represents
a different aspect of contemporary art. The former has a strong academic background - he is himself a professor and has been curating shows which emphasize what he calls 'academic merit'. He really pays attention to the quality and seriousness of the art. He also talks a lot about infrastructure, and is interested in establishing a system of exhibitions. He spent some time with official museums helping them to develop certain programmes and is involved in the private sector as well - I feel that this is both an interesting and courageous way of developing as well.

By comparison, Feng Boyi represents a more alternative position. He is probably best known as one of the curators of the infamous "Fucked Off" show, but this is somehow a little misleading. Feng is really a serious curator; for example, in "Trace of Existence", he examined the location and experimental nature of exhibitions.

Both have very good relationships with the artists. I spoke with them at length before I formed the panel and came away with the feeling we would be a very good team. So far, this has proven correct. We really have been working rather well.

O: Mr Feng, how do you reconcile playing a major role in curating an important major event like the 'FO' show and your current involvement with an institutionalized event like the Guangzhou Triennial?

FBY: I should point out firstly that my position as curator has not undergone any change. ‘FO’ was an event designed to document what was original in Chinese art and not necessarily in conformity with contemporary Chinese art as it is perceived in the West. The point was to present original Chinese trends at the end of the millennium. It wasn’t designed to please or pander to the general public. Any shock value that the show had was the original work of the artists, and originality is always an essential element of experimental art.

Like the Shanghai events, experimentation is the keynote of ‘Reinterpretation’. It is the recognition by a major gallery that significant changes have occurred in contemporary Chinese art and that there is a need to take stock of these changes and keep abreast of them. Government galleries have fallen behind for far too long.

O: Director Wang, given the conflicts with mainstream culture, censorship and legality that experimental art has long been associated with, were you not concerned that there would be an independent versus institutional dichotomy?

WHS: Personally, I feel that these are not problems. To begin with, our starting point was an orthodoxy one. It is respectful of both culture and history, and does not address any of the issues which run counter to the mainstream. There was already some sort of tacit agreement between all the curators about what we wanted to achieve. Things were handled in a democratic way; everyone was able to express their views.

I felt that we learned a lot in terms of organizational skills from our colleagues. The differences were in fact constructive ones: Wu Hung’s experience in curating shows overseas enabled him to take a broader view and address the larger picture where cultural issues are concerned.

O: Professor Wu, was this the first time you have curated a show of this scale in China? How was this different from your previous experiences?

WH: This is the first time I’ve curated a show in China and indeed on this scale. My previous experiences of curating in the United States were very different. Chinese museums are not organized like their American counterparts; museums in the States have people taking care of each part of the process; it is extremely professional and well-organized. But it is slow, a large show will take about three years to plan, with the writing and design of a catalogue taking up to a year.

Now they have big museums like the GDMA in China. The hardware is there but the staff are new. They have great enthusiasm, inspiration and aspiration - all this spirit - but they still have to learn how to do the practical things, like how to borrow things from different collections, organize insurance, etc. They are both learning and doing at the same time.

For myself, it can be frustrating, because a lot of things are not exactly in place. While the aspiration and enthusiasm is touching, I constantly worry that we cannot meet that deadline. At this moment, they are still designing the catalogue, which is supposed to come out next month - perhaps this is insecurity on my part. There are a lot of people trying very hard at the last minute to realize things. This is perhaps the major difference.

But I feel that the excitement generated is the most valuable part of the experience. Probably not everything will be technically perfect, but sometimes it is these rough edges which are valuable in contemporary art - this is the quality of experimentation.

O: What were the criteria for selection?

FBY: The Triennial presents works by about 130 artists that we believe to be the most significant of the 1990s. However, it is imperative to point out that we are not concerned with the success of particular artists on the international market - that was not a factor.

WHS: The experimental aspect was of course vital. The emphasis was placed not on the artist but on the work of art. Another important consideration was whether the work had any impact, and what sort of impact this was. We will certainly not select something based on its ability to create a sensation or increase newspaper circulation. Not all impact is global in nature. It can also be created by popular will.

WH: Perhaps this can be inferred from the selection process. Once the curatorial committee had drawn up the list of important works. This was before we had begun any discussions. I felt that this way we could understand our different criteria as curators. Each of us came up with a separate list of about 120 works. Many overlapped, surprisingly about 60 to 70 per cent. This was a delightful coincidence of thought and it showed a shared understanding of important works and artists.

We then had a long meeting to discuss these pieces, and finally, the defining criterion which emerged was quality. This refers to a work that has lasting artistic value and visual attraction. Looking at it a decade later, the work has retained its respectability.

The work also often represents a trend, at its point of emergence or its zenith, like urban bodies, brand representation and performance. For the artists, we have tried to find their best work and also something that was representative of the trend as a whole - such works can be used as an example of the larger phenomena. There were probably about 130 works that fitted these two criteria.

Our primary consideration was the work - focusing on that is more objective. It builds a common platform. Once you start thinking that the person - in other words the artist - is more important, then selection becomes very hard.

There were times when we consulted the artists; we asked them which of their works are most representative, so some of our initial selections were changed. Then there were others like Zhang Xiaogang and Liu Xiaozhong, they have so many paintings. These painters will specify that a particular work was important to them. In these situations, we would pay attention to their words and would often adopt their recommendations.

O: Can you tell us about the new works which have been specially commissioned for the Triennial?

FBY: This is where ‘Reinterpretation' dif-
China. The enthusiasm, desire to learn and different doings are not pushing. I feel at a moment, which is not quite a lot of pressure. This is a valuable part of the contemporary art.

WH: But this was something we had to do carefully thought. In a view of the retrospective and historical nature of the show, we decided to commission new works from a selection of artists so that the audience could see some of these pieces and make a comparison with the existing work. There is of course an emphasis on the experimental. This is a form of continuity. During the 1990s, these artists made spirited breakthroughs and reaped rich results. The new works show how they have been able to advance their experimental thinking.

These are artists who still have the spirit of experimentation and not those who, once they have succeeded in their experimentation, entrenched themselves in those results. When these new works are placed alongside the important works, the viewer begins to ‘recall’ and reinterpret.

WH: Even as we speak, the list is not finalized. There are at least thirteen, with two or three more to come. There are the veterans of the experimental scene: Wang Guangyi and Ai Weiwei are two old avant-garde artists. The latter was a member of the Stars group from 1979, and others like Wang Guangyi and Gu Dexin were very active in the 1980s. These artists have continued to push, change and develop. They haven’t stopped or repeated themselves; they represent those who keep pushing the boundaries and reinventing themselves.

Then there are the artists who were distinctive in the 1990s. This is a group whose focus is different – they are interested in trying new forms and media. A key to experimentation is sensitivity to the medium. Wang Jin started his performance art pretty early on and carried out some interesting projects, but he later shifted to sculpture using ceramics, metal and plastic. Peng Mengbo started out in Political Pop but is now doing computer art. Others like Wang Gongxin and Zhang Yuehong specialize in video art and architecture respectively. These artists are very versatile and will try different media.

Overseas artists like Huang Yongping and Xu Bing are very original, and they create powerful works. There are also the group of artists representing a different mode of art practice; for example, the Guangzhou group. At this juncture, I would like to make a general statement: it is more important to keep a certain distance, to look at things in a certain way. I have always made sure that my catalogues do not become a substitute for the art itself. I have always tried to be open, and to avoid being too specific or restrictive.

O: Were the artists given any specifications for creating these works?

WH: As they were to suggest new dimensions and possibilities, the artists were basically given a free hand. Proposals were submitted. In some cases, we were in full agreement, while in others we had some questions. With the exception of the video works, they are to be located outdoors. Once you mention the open air setting, the artists will begin to think about space.

The idea of locating these works in an open space that the audience will come to before entering the museum is really quite profound. It means that they will become a viewer’s first encounter with the show: beginning with the present, it will be like going back in time. Moreover the works of artists like Xu Bing and Song Dong have a strong element of performance and are also very interactive – their work will convey some of the ambition associated with experimental art.

O: Yes, ambition, exhibition space and audience response are notable aspects of 1990s experimental art. For example, Wu Wenguang’s film Diary: Snow, Nov. 21 1998 at the cancellation of the ‘It’s Me’ show is a good example of encapsulating a certain mood – it is both artwork and social document. As ‘Reinterpretation’ is presented from a historical viewpoint, understanding this zeitgeist is as important as the physical work itself. How can this be experienced by the audience?

WH: While the historical aspect is taken into account, we have to make sure that these lively works of art are not reduced to isolated individual works or turned into relics. While we cannot and are not recreating the situation and environment entirely, three things were done to provide a sense of context. Certain installation shows are reconstructed. One is called ‘Woman/Here’ by Su Jinguo, Zhan Wang and Yu Fan. This was a small exhibition held to coincide with the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995. The artists depicted their mothers through a series of personal documents.

Then we have the three main themes. Subjects like urban transformation in ‘Self and Environment’ will give the audience a feel of Chinese cities like Shanghai and Beijing where dramatic changes have taken place.

I feel that the catalogue is the most important because it was conceived together with the show as a single project. But it has a different role. It provides an account of happenings, events and situations like cancellations which the show itself cannot provide.

The new works which we’ve invited artists to create are situational and will convey the sense of experimental art in a public space. We want to try and capture or recapture this quality. We need to emphasize the relationship between art and the place.

O: The three themes of the show are ‘Memory and Reality’, ‘Self and Environment’ and ‘Global and Local’. Of which do you feel most relevant, as a curator and an individual?

WH: The themes were proposed by Wu Hung. ‘Reality and Memory’ was already a recurring theme in the 1980s. Scar literature and the 1985 New Wave all addressed this issue, but of course the emphasis is different. The 1990s focused more on the individual rather than on collective memory.

For myself, it is the globalization theme that is most significant in the 1990s. The issue has become significant because of the many artists who left China in the 1980s – some returned and some left again. How did they face the world and international culture? How did the changing face of the world and of communications like the Internet affect them? There were confusions of choice that came out of liberalization and also the idea of international standards. They ask themselves: ‘How do I measure up to them as an artist?’ It is important to understand how artists in China feel about the world, how nationwide changes have affected them as individuals. There are these important directions and a variety of subject-matter that is constantly changing. Personally, I like the challenge of the subject.

As for ‘Self and the Environment’, it is a more placid topic, but the discourse continues to evolve as China’s physical environment undergoes rapid changes. In the 1990s, the theme was still at a nascent stage of development, but as more people become concerned about the environment, it will probably become more prominent in the next decade.

WH: All the themes are crucial, each of them relate to me personally. But I think they are relevant to everyone in China because the country has changed so much. The contexts are common and the experiences similar but each artist will invent a different artistic language or form.

O: Aside from the specific aims of the ‘Reinterpretation’ show, what does the GDMFA hope to achieve by establishing the Triennial, and how will the momentum be kept up?

WH: I hope that the international community will take an interest in what we are doing. When I visited Documenta earlier this year, I realized that many people knew Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong, but few had heard of Guangzhou. While there was great interest in the museum, they knew little about the city in which we were located. Through the Triennials I hope we can do something for the cultural status of the city. I hope it can also correct the preconceived notion that Guangzhou is a city of commerce. It is a vibrant city and that should be exploited.

As for momentum, we will continue to follow the distinctive path which I outlined earlier. If we don’t lose sight of our focus on historical perspective, we will put ourselves on the map. We will aim for an international perspective in our next Triennial.