The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art

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As the largest single hydroelectric project in human history, the Three Gorges Project (Sanxia gongcheng) on the Yangtze river in central China (scheduled for completion in 2009) has provoked sharp controversy since its inception on 14 December 1994. Its advocates expect the dam to generate clean energy, crucial for China’s economic growth and social stability: it will supply one ninth of the country’s electric power, equivalent to 50 million tons of coal a year, 25 million tons of crude oil or fifteen nuclear power plants. They argue that the dam will lower greenhouse gas emissions, boost trade in China’s interior, and help control the chronic flooding along the Yangtze, which killed 300,000 people in the 20th century. The critics of the project, on the other hand, emphasize the human cost and environmental impact: by the time of the project’s completion, more than 1.3 million people will have been forced to relocate; nearly 1,400 villages and towns will have been flooded; debris from the submerged factories and hospitals will contaminate the Yangtze river and its many tributaries; and the ecosystem of the whole region will be disrupted. Moreover, a large number of historical and archaeological sites will be lost permanently, and the natural beauty of the Three Gorges, so much admired in traditional art and poetry, will be changed forever.

We are familiar with these arguments in words: there are numerous articles, news reports, books and sociological and environmental studies on the subject. There are, however, other kinds of responses to the Three Gorges Project that have less to do with policy issues, and which reveal a more personal approach to the actual changes brought about – artistic representations of the project, which are abundant in quantity and wide-ranging in the media used. Some of these works have won international acclaim: Jia Zhangke’s (b. 1970) Still Life (Sanxia haoren; 2006) received the Golden Lion award at the 63rd Venice International Film Festival, and a documentary by Li Yifan and Yan Yu, Before the Flood (Yinmo; 2004), won a string of international awards in 2005. In visual art, the Three Gorges Project has attracted photographers from all over the world, whose images document the construction of the giant dam and its far-reaching impact on the area. Then there are works in various branches of the fine arts, including ink and oil painting, sculpture, graphic art, installation, land art and video. Taken together, these works are significant for two major reasons: they leave us with a vivid and often nuanced record of the Three Gorges Project over a prolonged period, and they reflect various experiments in contemporary art – explorations of the relationship between art and politics, the artist’s responsibility to society, and the content and language of contemporary art expression. The exhibition ‘Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art’, running from 2 October 2008 to 25 January 2009, which I have curated for the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, focuses on the latter aspect.

The four artists in the exhibition – Chen Qiulin, Yun-Fei Ji, Liu Xiaodong and Zhuang Hui – differ markedly in educational background and artistic practice. Chen Qiulin is a newly emerging performance and video artist. Yun-Fei Ji employs the traditional medium of ink-and-colour on paper. Liu Xiaodong is one of the best-known realist oil painters in today’s China. Zhuang Hui is a veteran conceptual artist. Without coordination, they travelled individually to the Yangtze river and created powerful, yet very different, works in response to the Three Gorges Project.

Chen Qiulin (b. 1975) grew up in the city of Wanzian, in Sichuan province, on the upper reaches of the Three Gorges. According to the master plan of the Three Gorges Project, 47 per cent of the urban area of this city would be under

(Fig. 1) Still from Rhapsody on Farewell
By Chen Qiulin (b. 1975); 2002
Video
9 minutes
(Photograph courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery)
water by 2005, and a quarter of a million residents were slated for resettlement. Chen spent her childhood in Wanxian. After graduating from high school in 1998, she went to Chongqing to study graphic art. Two years later she returned to Wanxian to work, before leaving again the following year for Chengdu, Sichuan's capital. There she joined a group of avant-garde artists and made some daring performances and installations, but it was only in 2002, when she again returned to Wanxian and witnessed the destruction of her old home and many familiar places, that a real breakthrough in her art occurred (Wu, pp. 71-74). The result was a moving video called Rhapsody on Farewell (Bié jì; 2002).

The video begins with two sequences of images that rapidly intersect. One sequence shows the demolition of a concrete building on the bank of the Yangtze river. The other focuses on Chen Qulin’s transformation into Consort Yu (Yu Meiren), a tragic heroine in the Peking opera piece The King Bids Farewell to His Mistress (Bawang bie ji), better known in the West as Farewell My Concubine. The story goes that in 202 BCE, Xiang Yu (232-202 BCE), the powerful king of Western Chu, had resigned himself to defeat in competing for supremacy. During the last crucial battle with his enemies, when he and his troops found themselves trapped by enemy forces, blocked by a river and unable to retreat further, Yu Meiren danced her last dance for her lord and then committed suicide. Both sequences of images, then, are about death, and their rapid intersection implies the interchangeability between the death of a place and the death of a woman. During the course of the video, these two sequences are developed into two intertwining narrative threads. Following the first thread, we witness the violence inflicted on a city and its impact on people's lives. Along with these images, Yu Meiren’s story unfolds to its climax. The artist herself connects these two threads, appearing in various guises – as Yu Meiren in the historical opera, as herself in an opera costume swirling amid ruined houses (a ghost from the past?) (Fig. 1), and in black-and-white, as a little girl running across the screen. These fragmented self-portraits heighten the feelings of dislocation and trauma, and convey Chen’s frustration and helplessness: ‘I felt really sad and even angry when I shot Rhapsody on Farewell because so many memories were gone. It also felt like these things were being snatched away, and there was nothing I could do about it’ (ibid., p. 74).

She adds, however: ‘Later, as I shot the other videos [also about the Three Gorges Project: River, River (Jiangshui; 2005), Color Lines (Càitiāo; 2006) and The Garden (Huayuan; 2007)], I noticed that my mood was changing.’ Not coincidentally, during this period, from 2005 to 2007, the Three Gorges Project entered its final two phases. As the water rose and swallowed many demolished buildings, it also concealed the wounds and scars on the land. At the same time, new, modern high-rises rapidly began to appear above the old towns, orienting people’s gaze towards a different kind of
spectacle that offered hope for renewal. Such a shift in people’s psychology is clearly felt in River, River, in which the construction of the new city is being carried out at full speed. Only scattered ruins of the old city remain in sight, amid half-finished or completed bridges, docks, power stations, high-tension electric lines, high-rise apartment buildings and a giant stadium near the Yangtze. A broad stretch of land along the river is not yet paved, but has already attracted young people and children eager to explore new territory. Some are flying kites—symbol of hope. A fashionable young couple hold hands and climb onto a mound of pebbles overlooking the water (Fig. 2). The man has a ponytail and the woman’s long hair is dyed brown; but for the backdrop, they could equally be in Tokyo, Shanghai or Hong Kong. Historical memory still lingers, but in a less threatening manner than in her earlier work. Echoing the lovers on the riverbank is a historical couple from The Legend of the White Snake (Baishe zhuan). Framed within the modern tale of the Three Gorges Project, Chen’s summary re-presentation of the opera quickly goes through the couple’s first meeting, their mistrust and separation, and their final reconciliation. Unlike the tragedy of Farewell My Concubine re-enacted in the first video, the reference to The Legend of the White Snake promises healing.

In retrospect, it is evident that for Chen, the Three Gorges dam is never simply an external reality, a grand object that one can praise or criticize. Taking an insider’s position, she has responded to the day-to-day changes brought about by the project in her hometown. She has experienced the sacrifice that the dam demanded from the local people, and shared their dream of a better life in the future. From this perspective, the significance of the four videos lies not in documenting the transformation of the region, but in their sensitive representation of the conflicting emotions and desires of an artist who identifies with her subject.

Yun-Fei Ji (b. 1963) also went to the Three Gorges in 2002, a trip that profoundly changed his art. Unlike Chen Qiulin, however, who travelled there from nearby Chengdu, Ji
started his journey in Brooklyn, New York, where he had been living and working for a decade. Also unlike Chen, who is a native of the upper Yangtze region, Ji had no personal connections with the area. Born and raised in Beijing, he studied painting at an early age and was considered an artistic prodigy, being admitted to the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts at the tender age of 15 and skipping high school entirely. After graduating from the academy, he went to the United States in 1986, first pursuing an MFA at the University of Arkansas and then becoming an independent artist in New York. Before long, his distinctive painting style caught the eye of art critics and curators in the city. Executed on soft rice paper and taking traditional Chinese landscape painting as his point of departure, his images can be read as a kind of mindscape populated by human, semi-human and non-human creatures from both the real and fantasy worlds. Before 2002, most of his works were inspired by traumatic events in China’s modern history: the First Opium War in 1840, the occupation of the Forbidden City by foreign troops in 1900, and especially the catastrophic Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Instead of reconstituting historical events in a realistic style, however, he resurrected fragmentary historical memories to forge a supra-historical view of China. The dark humour and penchant for the grotesque he showed in these works made one New York reviewer compare him with Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516), James Ensor (1860-1949) and George Grosz (1893-1959) (Michael Wilson, ‘Yun-Fei Ji: Pratt Manhattan Gallery’, in Artforum, vol 41, no. 9, May 2003, p. 171). To a Chinese art historian, however, his work would be more likely to evoke the tradition of the painter of ghosts, Luo Pin (1733-99).

Yun-Fei Ji’s engagement with the Three Gorges Project marked a crucial reorientation in his historical imagination. Although China’s harrowing experience continued to dominate his mind, he shifted his gaze from the past to the present. Roaming from one ruined village to another in the Three Gorges area for several weeks, he found the place to be undergoing a gradual decomposition even before its death. This observation became the basis for a large series of paintings called The Empty City (2003) and a long scroll titled Water Rising (2006) (Fig. 3). In both works, displacement is not only the central subject of representation, but is also internalized as pictorial imagery and style. Water Rising, for example, depicts isolated groups of men and women in a vast, desolate landscape along a river. Most houses on the bank have been destroyed, and windows, doors and furniture are scattered around. Some people are putting their belongings onto tricycle carts and wheelbarrows. Others stand silently in front of their ruined houses, taking a final look. Still others are already on the road. Mostly on foot, they carry whatever they can take with them to their new abodes. These figures are scattered in a broken landscape: the disconnected rocks and trees do not comprise a continuous natural environment but reflect tension and trauma on a deeper, psychological level. Critics have found compositional similarities between Ji’s large hanging scrolls and Northern Song period (960-1127) monumental landscape art. But if the Northern Song images manifest a set of visual logic devised to glorify great mountains, Ji twists and distorts such logic, since all the spatial elements in these works belong to a universe that seems to have been pummelled by a tempest (Fig. 4). It is a broken-down utopia.
Arguably the most celebrated realist oil painter in China today, Liu Xiaodong (b. 1963) made his artistic debut in the early 1990s, when he had his first solo exhibition in Beijing followed by an important group show called ‘The New Generation’ (‘Xin shengdai’). Although the participating artists had all received their education at the country’s best art academies and still insisted on figurative images, their painting styles showed a considerable departure from the Socialist Realist model. Instead of depicting the Party’s history and the revolutionary masses, these New Realists invariably derived their inspiration from their minute yet fragmentary observations of mundane life. The paintings that Liu created in the 1990s best represent this style.

After Liu travelled to the Three Gorges in 2002 and embarked on his own Three Gorges project in the following years, however, his paintings suddenly acquired a measure of monumentality. The main works he created from 2003 to 2005 are three enormous compositions: Great Migration at the Three Gorges (Sanxia da yimin; 2003), New Settlers at the Three Gorges (Sanxia xin yimin; 2004) and Hotbed (Wenchuang; 2005) (Fig. 5). While all three works were envisioned as visual epics, Hotbed is unique in its performative and site-specific qualities. With a group of assistants, Liu set up a work space on the rooftop of an abandoned building in the old city of Fengjie, which would soon be destroyed, with the remains becoming submerged beneath the rising river (Fig. 6). He spent three weeks in this environment in September 2005, portraying a group of half-naked labourers. When I first saw Hotbed in his studio, I was struck by his skill and determination in rendering
such vivid, expressive images under such difficult conditions: beaten by the glaring sun, constantly having to move around the awkwardly positioned canvas to paint, and using unfamiliar implements like long-handled paintbrushes. So why did he choose to make this painting in situ near the Yangtze? Why did he abandon the practice of copying photographs and drawing models in an indoor space, as an academic painter is accustomed to doing? Interestingly, when I brought up these questions, he talked little about the painting's content or style, but instead focused on his need to act: 'I think that the artist cannot do without action. It's not right to become a true literatus. The artist must act, like a labourer. Regardless of the result, there is a big difference between working on-site or not' (Wu, p. 134).

'To act' and 'to be there' are, therefore, the two main motives for the painting's creation. In this way, the work constitutes an action painting and a site-specific performance in itself. Consequently, the labourers' individuality and their collective symbolism retreat from the artist's central concerns. Instead, the painting's significance lies in revealing the artist's existence. The viewer detects Liu's participation and excitement in the swift movement of the brush, the sketchy rendering of the human bodies and the sense of sunlight. A large section of the far left panel is unfinished, and the mattress on another panel is only roughly sketched out. The incompleteness of the painting, however, generates a heightened feeling of action: we feel that Liu was working to a fixed deadline, competing against time to capture the images in front of him. He says: 'The energy of my actions has entered the paintings, and this “entering” itself is very meaningful. The traces formed on-site are irreplaceable. You cannot repair it after you come back to the studio. Add one brush stroke, and it is wrong. It's different from the experience of painting in the studio' (ibid.).

Action is also the central aspect of Zhuang Hui's (b. 1963) conceptual work Longitude 109.88° E and Latitude 31.09° N (Dongjing 109.88 du, Beiwei 31.09 du), which took 13 years to complete. In early 1995, four months after the Three Gorges Project officially began, Zhuang responded to the government undertaking with a site-specific artwork at three locations, each corresponding to one of the Three Gorges (Fig. 7). First he went to Sandouping, the site of the great dam, in the Xiling gorge area in Hubei province, where he found that construction work had already begun on Zhongbao island in the middle of the river. Quietly, he chose a place next to the construction site and drilled 27 holes with a Luoyang shovel, a long-poled drill invented by tomb robbers in ancient China. The holes, each 30 to 40 centimetres deep, were aligned in straight rows to form a triangle. After photographing each hole from above, he travelled west by boat to Wu gorge and stopped at the meeting point of the Yangtze and Daning rivers. This time he drilled fifty holes in a curved line extending for exactly one kilometre along the northwest corner of the river delta. Zhuang ended his journey at Baidi city at the entrance of Qutang gorge (Fig. 8). A legendary place since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220), this ‘city’ crowned a small hill on a tiny peninsula, which would become an island when the dam was completed. Zhuang encircled the peninsula with holes and again took photographs (Fig. 9).

To any passer-by, this series of performances must have appeared incomprehensible and bizarre. But I believe that history will place it among the most original works by a contemporary Chinese artist. The main significance of the project lies in the delayed realization of its meaning and impact: over the past 13 years, Zhuang has never shown the complete work in exhibitions until now, not because he did not have the opportunity to do so but because he was waiting for the moment that would bring the project to a full close. That moment would be more than a decade from 1995, when the dam had been completed and the resulting enormous reservoir filled with water. 'I thought in ten years' time the water level of the dam would reach 136 meters [above sea level],' Zhuang recalls, 'and the traces I left would be more than a hundred meters down in the water' (ibid., p. 153). It is interesting that he calls the holes 'traces'—evidence of a former presence or condition. These are not traces of his performance, however. Instead, Zhuang envisioned them as part of a landscape that would soon vanish, and which the images of the holes lying underwater would force people to remember.
In 2007, then, Zhuang sent a photographer to the Three Gorges. Giving him a map marked with the locations of the three groups of holes, he instructed him to take photographs of the sites. The images that the photographer brought back show only water, and more water. Zhuang says that these pictures made his heart ache, 'because something disappears – not the holes that I dug, but the river, which we were familiar with and which existed so naturally. Although it's still called the Yangtze River, it's not the same' (ibid., p. 154).

Through featuring works by these four very different artists, this exhibition is able to offer a broader and more complex view of contemporary Chinese art than many of the shows organized in the West in recent years, which typically address particular art forms or trends. The majority have showcased avant-garde or experimental works, which are often created for a global audience and tend to favor new art forms. In comparison, realist oil painting and traditional ink painting have been largely ignored, although important works continue to be produced in these two genres, which have broad bases in China. This exhibition was conceived to correct such an imbalance. In fact, the four artists represent four major branches of contemporary Chinese art – oil painting, ink painting, conceptual art and new media art. Organizing the exhibition around shared themes and concerns, we hoped to call attention to common issues faced by contemporary Chinese artists through a set of divergent art forms.

By focusing on the Three Gorges Project, we also hoped to encourage discussion about the relationship between contemporary art and the social, political and environmental issues of today – an important and timely subject that transcends the specific topic of this exhibition. Should contemporary art address the real world, and in so doing, engage in political debate and socio-economic reform? In what ways can such engagement stimulate artistic innovation and creativity? What is the social role of contemporary art and artists? As these questions have re-emerged in today's art criticism and are attracting increasing attention from artists and art critics worldwide, this exhibition may provide some answers as well as a platform for discussion.

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All translations from the Chinese are by Xiao Tie and Peggy Wang.

Selected bibliography

Wu Hung, with Jason McGrath and Stephanie Smith, Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art, Chicago, 2008.