About the Curator

Wu Hung grew up in Beijing and received his B.A. and M.A. in art history from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He went to the United States in 1980 and obtained his Ph.D. in art history and anthropology from Harvard University in 1987. That same year he began to teach art history at Harvard, where he was promoted to full professor in 1994. He then moved to the University of Chicago, where he is now Harrie A. Vanderstappen Distinguished Service Professor in Chinese Art History at the Department of Art History and the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations.

A scholar well-known for his work on traditional Chinese art, Wu Hung has always had an intense interest in contemporary Chinese art and has contributed significantly to the scholarship in this area. In the mid-eighties he organized a series of exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art at Adams House, Harvard University, which featured the American debuts of important artists including Mu Xin, Chen Danqing, Luo Zhongli, Qiu Deshu, and Zhang Hengtu. He has published many books and articles on contemporary Chinese art and visual culture in various journals and has contributed to many exhibition catalogues. In 1999 and 2000 he curated Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century and Canceled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China. The catalogues he wrote for these two exhibitions provide in-depth analyses of the recent development of experimental Chinese art. Currently he is the chief curator of the forthcoming First Guangzhou Triennial entitled Remanifestation: A Decade of Experimental Art in China (1990-2000), and is also collaborating with New York's International Center for Photography and Chicago's Smart Museum of Art on a large exhibition of contemporary Chinese photography. His most recent publications include Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2001).
Variations of Ink: A Dialogue with Zhang Yanyuan

Wu Hung

This exhibition takes its title from a principle in traditional Chinese painting criticism and connoisseurship, namely that "ink encompasses all the five colors" (mo fen wu se). The inventor of this principle was the great Tang dynasty art critic and historian Zhang Yanyuan, whose Record of the Famous Painters of All the Dynasties (Lidai minghuajji, compiled in 847) constitutes, in Michael Sullivan's words, "the earliest known history of painting in the world." The significance of this treatise, however, goes far beyond its early date of composition: Zhang’s ideas continue to inspire contemporary artists and art critics in their creation and appreciation of visual forms. Not only the title of this exhibition, but the whole idea of assembling a group of works to reflect on the role of ink in contemporary Chinese art, comes from Zhang’s writings - more specifically from the section in his treatise entitled "On Painting Materials, Tracing and Copying."

This section, the eighth one in the treatise, has received less attention from scholars, partly because the heading gives the impression that here Zhang Yanyuan deals exclusively with technical matters of painting. This is certainly not true. For one thing, in this section one finds the most sophisticated - and at times the most philosophical - discourse on the art medium of ink ever attempted by a Chinese writer. Because of its profundity as well as abstractness, this discourse has transcended its particular historical time to become a "primary text" in Chinese art criticism. I read this text once again last year and was surprised by its relevance to recent works by some contemporary Chinese artists, who experiment with the value of ink in abstract visual expression. Since I have also been absorbed by the idea of organizing what I call "experimental exhibitions" to test the role of public art display, I have a two-fold purpose in organizing this small show.

First and more practical, this exhibition presents to the public a group of ink paintings and installations that exemplify an important branch of contemporary Chinese experimental art. These works, which largely affiliate themselves with abstract
and conceptual art, demonstrate a shared tendency to separate "ink" from "brush." Hence they also divorce themselves from traditional Chinese painting, which consistently emphasizes the joint importance of bi (brushwork) and mo (ink). In other words, one finds in these works the deliberate dominance of ink over other visual elements. By pushing the role of this traditional medium to such an extreme, the artists both substantiate an ancient art tradition and subvert it.

Gone with the brushwork are identifiable shapes and other mimetic qualities of a painting. This exhibition offers abstract "ink" images that reject direct literary translation and social interpretation. Western viewers who have been following recent exhibitions of Chinese "avant-garde" art outside China may find these "formalist" works refreshing; the previous exhibitions, including some I myself have curated, have often interpreted contemporary Chinese art in a sociopolitical framework; the curators' selection of artists and works has often been guided, either consciously or unconsciously, by such a framework. One purpose of this exhibition is therefore to balance this familiar picture with images that reveal other kinds of experimentation in contemporary Chinese art. These experiments, which typically focus on formal qualities of a painting - materiality, abstract shape, and tonal variation - have frequently been overlooked in large "sociological" exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art.

Second and more fundamental, although in most exhibitions texts elucidate images, I see this exhibition as serving the reverse role, as providing synchronized "post-modern" visual commentaries on Zhang Yanyuan's writings on ink. The idea is that by looking at these contemporary images, the public may reach a better understanding of the ancient text. Zhang's discussion of ink forms an independent entry, separated from his discussion on "brushwork" in the same treatise: it is almost as if he had foreseen the divorce of ink from brush, as manifested in these images created more than a thousand years after his time.

This exhibition thus hopes to provide a site for a dialogue between contemporary Chinese art and its remote origins. This is a "dialogue" because each work on view testifies to a deliberate negotiation between an artist and his artistic origin. While these artists acknowledge their roots in pre-modern Chinese art, they are also trying to renew this art by making it contemporary and global. These two seemingly opposite positions are at the heart of Zhang Yanyuan's aesthetics. He writes: "Now the fashion of the traditional image emerges in complete transformation of the artistic process."

For Zhang Yanyuan, 'human beings long to live.' He and living creatures are so intertwined. He writes: "The clouds and swirls are color and the color is their origin; the turquoises and the pinks, the murrays and the blues are color and the color is their origin; the sun and the moon are color and the color is their origin; the phoenix is iridescent color and the color is its origin."

This serenity, this balance, is achieved by using ink long ago defined by the yi or "mind" of the ancient Chinese. Once the Yi Kingdoms and the states that followed had listened to his wisdom: "Yanyuan summed up the essence of things."

He writes: "Now the mind no longer exists in the ink, and the ink no longer exists in the mind. It is only a meticulous delineation of an object."

Once the specific advice by Yi Xing: "When the mind is in the ink, the ink has life. When the ink is in the mind, the mind has form. When the mind and ink have life, the essence of things is revealed. When things are revealed, the essence of those things is revealed."

This exhibition is that same pursuit. It is an attempt to synthesize the essence of things, specifically in the medium of ink.
other mimetic qualities reject direct literary inventions texts elucidate widening synchronized explications on ink. The idea is may reach a better form; an independent treatise: it is almost said in these images Dialogue because each artist and his artistic im Chinese art, they and global. These two seemingly opposite paths have led them to rediscover the "essence" of ink -- a concept at the heart of Zhang Yanyuan’s discourse.

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Zhang Yanyuan begins his discourse on ink with the creation of the universe: "Now the fashioning forces Yin and Yang have intermingled; the myriad images emerge in complex patterns. No human words are needed for the mysterious transformation of things - the divine work of Nature operates alone to generate this process."³

For Zhang, "words" (yi) refer to all verbal and visual signs. Invented by human beings long after the creation of the universe, these signs serve to identify and describe natural phenomena but remain ultimately external to them. One category of such signs is color, which can be used to mimic the concrete appearances of things and living creatures, but can never reveal their essence. Hence in his words: "Grasses and trees spread forth their glory without depending on cinnabar and jasper; floating clouds and swirling snow are naturally white without waiting for ceruse to make them so; the turquoise mountains do not need mineral 'sky blue' powder; and the phoenix is iridescent without the application of multiple colors."

This series of analogues leads Zhang Yanyuan to define the unique role of ink: to him, this black substance alone allows artists to achieve what cannot be achieved by using radiant "mimetic" colors. The "colorlessness" of ink turns out to be its most precious strength -- when used well it can produce endless layers of subtle shades that imply a multitude of colors without representing them. What the artist can capture in an ink painting, therefore, is not the outward appearance of things, but the yi or "mind" -- his own comprehension of the phenomenal world. As Zhang Yanyuan summarizes this view: "If by using ink a painter can allude to the five colors, we say that he has grasped the mind. But if an artist’s mind is fixed on true colors, the essence of things will escape him."

Once this principle is established, Zhang Yanyuan proceeds to give painters specific advice by developing the concept of liao - the "completeness" of a painting. He writes: "Now in painting things, what an artist should especially avoid include meticulous delineation and coloration of forms, excessive carefulness to details, and
explicit display of skills and finish. From here it follows that one should not deplore lack of completeness but rather that completeness is deplorable. For once one knows that an image has reached its completeness, where is the need of completing it further? It is not that there is really any incompleteness here: it is not recognizing when an image has reached its completeness that is the real incompleteness."

Here, Zhang Yanyuan is speaking about two different kinds of "completeness" - one understood as a thorough rendering of external appearances and the other referring to the complete grasp of the mind. He seems to be speaking not only to painters but also to viewers of an ink painting. What one should look for in such a painting, he advises, is whether the painter has deliberately rejected a naturalistic representation and reached this second kind of completeness. A good painter is someone who can translate the mind into the "five colors" of ink; a good viewer is someone who can see such a mind in the lack of colorful, mimetic images.

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The contemporary Chinese curator and art critic Pi Daojian writes in the opening of his introduction to an exhibition called China: 20 Years of Ink Experiment (Guangzhou, 2001): "At a time when globalization is becoming so pervasive and prevalent, it is almost impossible to find an artistic issue as 'Chinese' as 'ink'." Contrary to what one would expect, however, Pi finds the reason for the "Chineseness" of this so-called "ink problem" (shuimo wenji) not in ink's origin as a traditional medium, but in a debate among modern Chinese artists and art critics that has continued for over a century. The focus of this debate is whether "ink painting" (shuimo hua), though of traditional origin, can also be modern and contemporary.

It is impossible to even briefly review this debate in this short essay. As Pi Daojian has observed, the various participants in the debate remained nationalistic and solipsistic until the 1980s, since they had rarely thought of the problem in international terms, and since their solutions to "revolutionize" ink painting had heavily relied on renewing the subject matter of representation. An important change in ink painting took place in the 80s and fundamentally altered the orientation of this debate. Instead of approaching ink simply as a medium for painting, an increasing number of younger artists began to treat ink itself as the subject of artistic experimentation. Some of these artists had received formal training in traditional Chinese painting, but their interest in ink is in the art itself. For them, ink is often taken as "a labor of love," promoting the historical and aesthetic contributions of ink art (shiyuan hua), not art, not with an ideological agenda or participation in the Cultural Revolution and the so-called avant-garde experimentation with ink-reform."
Chinese painting and calligraphy, but many had not. Although they developed intense interest in ink and were fascinated with the potential of this material in contemporary art, they stayed firmly outside the camp of "national painting" (g uohua, a term which is often taken as synonymous to shui mo hua or "ink painting"). Indeed, a movement promoting a new "ink art" gradually emerged in the 80s and 90s. The most important contribution of this movement was to redefine this art as a branch of experimental art (sh i yuan yishu), which allies itself with international, multi-medium contemporary art, not with the orthodox school of "national painting."

The works in this exhibition are the fruit of this movement. The five participating artists, who are in their thirties and forties, belong to the post-Cultural Revolution generation of experimental artists. Most of them have engaged in avant-garde experimentation since the 1980s, and all of them have been experimenting with ink-related images for fifteen to twenty years. What this exhibition can offer is only a narrow glimpse of their wide-ranging experiments.

Although some images in this exhibition, such as those by Chen Xinmao and Chen Guanwu, employ calligraphy and printing, the general strategy is to subvert and "deconstruct" calligraphy and printing as accepted art traditions and technologies. Chen Xinmao's multi-medium paintings frequently feature distorted historical texts - incomplete and partially smeared wood-block prints as a result of mis-printing. The blurred characters appear dilapidated, as "ruins" or "traces" of some canonical books that have gained a new identity as images of purely visual significance. The ambiguity between textual and visual expression is heightened by the varied use of the ink, which assumes contradictory roles from reproducing texts to making texts illegible, sometimes burying characters under richly-textured, spreading blots. Chen Guanwu's attitude towards calligraphy - an art form that he has been practicing since the age of sixteen -- is similarly iconoclastic. His works in the exhibition interpret calligraphy as a laborious writing practice, which dismisses any literary implication of writing through sheer repetition. With diluted ink Chen writes characters over and over on the same spot; the result is a layered presence of gray tones. To stress the subtlety of this ink "color" he frames it with harsh, black dots derived from the heterogeneous tradition of geometric abstraction.

In both Chen Xinmao's and Chen Guanwu's works, traditional Chinese
ink and contemporary visual techniques such as collage, installation, and performance form "a stirring coalition." This particular form of multi-medium art also typifies works by the other three artists in this exhibition. Among them, Wang Tiande has made arguably the most serious effort to integrate two-dimensional ink painting with three-dimensional installations. His well-known piece, the 1996 "Ink Manu," consists of a round dining table surrounded by six Ming-style chairs. All these pieces of furniture, as well as bowls, dishes and wine bottles on the table, are covered with rice paper and in turn painted with broad ink strokes. Instead of chopsticks, a pair of Chinese writing brushes is left in front of each empty chair, alluding to six "ghost painters" who have just completed their creations.

Wang Tiande's individual ink paintings often have round frames - a shape in his view that embodies a more organic, wholesome understanding of the cosmos typically found in Eastern philosophy. This view may also underlie Zhang Jianjun's installation, "Fog Inside," which he created in 1992 in Warsaw. The work is minimalist in spirit - a large, flat, round cylinder filled with ink-infused water. Although the cylindrical shape recalls a steel sculpture, the water inside it generates a sense of impermanence - a feeling reinforced by the steam that slowly rises from the liquid surface and disappears in the air. For the current exhibition, Zhang Jianjun has replaced the round cylinder with a square cube as the centerpiece of a larger installation/performance project. Surrounding this square cube are paintings that show large, burnt circles. The juxtaposition of the two primordial shapes, square and circle, as well as their respective connections with fire and water, implies the opposition between Yang and Yin. It is the audience who brings these two cosmological forces into interplay, as they move between the painting and the installation while sprinkling pieces of a dry ink case into the square "inkwell."

Our last artist, Yang Jiechang, began to create abstract ink paintings in the late 1980s. To him, such artistic experiments are intimately connected to his study of Zen Buddhism and Taoism (he actually studied Taoism with a Taoist master at Mt. Luofu in Guangdong from 1984 to 1986). In the series "100 Layers of Ink," he obsessively applied layers on layers of ink, creating abstract "black holes" with shining surfaces. A new style he has developed since the late 1990s is characterized by bold, explosive ink drawings. The titles of these works, such as "Crosses," "Knors," and "@," supply a certain sense of lived experience to otherwise abstract forms. These works belong to the outer appearance, the ambivalent relation to quote Martina F.

On the other hand, there is a sublimation in the Chinese literati sense.

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works belong to the series "Double View," a title that in Martina Koeppel Yang's view hints at "the technique of multiple layers of ink" and the "ambivalence of the outer appearance of the things." Even deeper in Yang Jiechang's experiment is his ambivalent relationship with traditional Chinese art and culture. On the one hand, to quote Martina Yang again, his art "shows an anti-traditional, anti-cultural attitude." On the other hand, "the elimination of skill, imagery and personality is nothing less than the sublimation of the self, the ultimate aim of the cultivation of personality the Chinese literati practiced through painting and calligraphy."

We may apply these words to the other four artists as well.

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2. Even the most adventurous painters of the "ink play" (mo-xie) type in traditional Chinese art, such as Ku Wei and Zhu Da, still relied on brushwork to make shapes.
5. "A string coalition" between Chinese tradition and contemporary art is an expression that Martina Koeppel-Yang uses to describe Yang Jiechang's work. See her introduction to Yang's exhibition held in 2001 in the Art Museum of Hong Kong University.
6. Ibid.