

SPHERES OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

This book tells the story of contemporary Chinese art from its underground genesis during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) to its emergence as one of the most dynamic global art forces in the 2000s. As such, it focuses on contemporary art in the People's Republic of China—a country that has undergone an enormous socioeconomic transformation over the past thirty years—and on artists who grew up and received their art education there. It does not cover Taiwan and Hong Kong, two parts of greater China, because contemporary art there has very different contexts and histories. The coverage of this book thus implies a general premise in discussing contemporary art: that this art is by nature plural and diverse. It is not only located in different places but also conditioned by different art traditions, historical experiences, and social environments. Meanwhile, the increasing tide of globalization since the early 1990s has brought contemporary Chinese art into an ever-expanding transnational exhibition culture and commercial network. Instead of producing unified standards in evaluation and interpretation, however, the global circulation of Chinese art works simultaneously recontextualizes them, bestowing on the term “contemporary Chinese art” a particular ethnographical significance in international exhibitions. As a result, this term is used in this book in two senses: one general and the other specific. In the general sense, as in the title of the book and most other cases, the term “contemporary art” refers to all kinds of “new Chinese art” that appeared since the 1970s, encompassing a number of other terms such as “modern art,” “avant-garde art,” “alternative art,” “unofficial art,” “underground art,” and “contemporary art” (in the narrow sense), which have been used in various contexts with difference emphases. In the specific sense, as discussed in Chapter 4, “contemporary art” is a particular term that Chinese critics and artists adopted in the early 1990s to mark a historical transition characterized by the rapid globalization of Chinese art.

I remember that several years ago, after giving a talk at the Art Miami fair, I was asked how an art could be both “Chinese” and “contemporary.” The person who raised this question clearly found these two concepts incompatible. But for those who do believe that contemporary art has multiple and distinct localities and histories, it is only natural that it should be defined historically and contextually, in the various junctures between the

global and the local, and in the incessant temporal and **spatial** movements of images, concepts, and artists in **interconnected** but never identical geo-cultural circles. **This** understanding leads us to conceptualize the history **of** contemporary Chinese art not only as a straightforward **development** in a predetermined location but also as a complex interactive process between three broad **"spheres"**: namely, China's domestic space, global art **networks**, and individualized venues generated by artists **and** curators. Each sphere presents different conditions **and** opportunities for contemporary Chinese art, and **each** elicits changing goals and operative strategies for **artists**. These spheres are never clearly demarcated, **however**. Domestic spaces are routinely infiltrated by **global**, commercial, and informational networks; artists **constantly** move in and out of China, generating fluxes **between** domestic and global spaces. With their distinct **spatiality** and temporality as well as their interdependence **and** interconnectedness, these three spheres constitute a multidimensional and dynamic stage upon which this **written** history of contemporary Chinese art unfolds.

Contemporary Chinese Art as a Domestic Movement

When situated in a domestic context, it is no exaggeration to say that Chinese contemporary art owes its very existence to China's transformation over the past three decades. Indeed, the emergence of contemporary art in China coincided with the end of the Cultural Revolution, which marked a new stage in modern Chinese history. Following the death of Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and the arrest on October 6, 1976, of the Gang of Four—an ultra-leftist political faction headed by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing (1914–1991)—a new generation of Chinese leaders made a dramatic turn to develop a market economy under the name "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Over the next two decades, foreign investment, technology, and cultural products poured into that previously tightly insulated country. Books on Western philosophy and literature, as well as images of Western art, became widely available to eager young artists. Art academies reestablished their position as strongholds of art education; independent art exhibitions came into fashion from the late 1970s onward. Numerous avant-garde groups burst onto the scene around the mid-1980s, forever changing the vista of Chinese art.

The proliferation of modern and contemporary art has continued to this day, especially after the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, which signaled the official acceptance of

contemporary art forms. Nonetheless, clashes between increasing demands for cultural liberalization and the government's desire to control artistic affairs have been unavoidable throughout this process. The early reform years of the 1980s also saw an official campaign against "bourgeois spiritual pollution," which could be interpreted as anything from pornography to abstract painting. In 1989, the heavy-handed suppression of the June 4th Movement—the pro-democratic student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, Beijing—also led to the banning of independent art exhibitions and publications for a time. When contemporary art resurfaced in the early 1990s, it adopted new tactics and followed a different course. These and similar instances, which constantly recall the prohibition of modern art during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, reveal a general pattern that distinguishes the development of contemporary art in China from that in the West. This is a "pattern of rupture" caused by political intrusions; the result has been a series of gaps as a general historical and 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 and space, the projects they have developed after each rupture often testify to a different set of parameters and are governed by a different temporality and spatiality.

Since the late 1970s, interaction and negotiation with five other art systems or realms have defined the domestic identity of contemporary Chinese art. These are: (1) a highly politicized official art under the direct sponsorship of the Communist Party; (2) an academic art which emphasizes technical and aesthetic refinement; (3) a "Chinese-style" pictorial art which preserves traditional forms and tastes; (4) a commercial art which devotes itself to domestic and international markets; and (5) a popular urban visual culture which eagerly absorbs fashionable images from across the globe. The boundaries between these systems have never been stable, however. Many artists belong to more than one realm, and the content and definition of each system are constantly shifting. Popular art is the most metamorphic and sensitive to fast-changing cultural and commercial stimuli. Art academies, through generally upholding the models of realist art and classical Chinese painting, have gradually expanded their repertoire to include modernist styles and contemporary forms; quite a few academically trained younger artists have even rebelled against academic doctrines to become pioneers of avant-garde and experimental art.

Similarly, a group of Chinese-style painters has advocated "experimental ink painting" as an indigenous form of contemporary art that both revitalizes and diverges from a traditional art form. Commercial art grew from limited state enterprises after the Cultural Revolution into arguably the most powerful system in Chinese art in the 2000s, simultaneously strengthening the economic independence of contemporary art and blurring the distinction between it and academic and popular art.¹ Even official art is not a solid monolith. Although the Party has never intended to give up control over visual art, its cultural policies oscillate between extreme strictness and relative relaxation, depending on the political situation.² Moreover, the Party controls art largely through the National Artists' Association. This is a semi-official organization which is responsible for organizing National Art Exhibitions and heads an enormous administrative network consisting of provincial associations and associations on even lower local levels. The four National Exhibitions held during the Cultural Revolution forged a monotonous, symbolic Communist art. But such exhibitions have changed greatly during the past thirty-five years. Many members of the National Artists' Association have been attracted by new art styles and commercial interests; their changing interests have directly influenced the actual production of official art, although the institutional mechanisms for this art have remained basically unaltered.

Coexisting and interacting with these other systems, contemporary art distinguishes itself by evoking a distinct sense of avant-gardism, experimentalism, and globalism. It becomes most identifiable when artists employ new contemporary forms such as installation art, performance, and other new media, and when it shows an anti-authority attitude and associates itself with Western-style individualism. But the chief defining factor of contemporary art in the domestic space is neither stylistic nor ideological but is, rather, the artist's self-positioning in a changing society. Generally speaking, for most of the thirty years from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the Chinese terms for "modern artist" (*xiandai yishujia*) and "contemporary artist" (*dangdai yishujia*) refer to those who place themselves at the *borders* of the Chinese art world. Taking up the mission of opening new territories both artistically and politically, they must also challenge their own marginality and constantly reposition themselves in order to be continuously "contemporary." This rather idealistic perception of contemporary artists was especially in vogue in the 1980s and 1990s, when

government institutions firmly rejected new art forms, and when cancellations of contemporary art exhibitions were commonplace. Under such circumstances, terms such as "modern art" and "contemporary art" were largely synonymous with "unofficial art" and "alternative art." This situation changed in 2000, when contemporary artists were invited to participate in the government-sponsored Shanghai Biennale. The following years witnessed a rapid process of commercialization and the depoliticization of contemporary Chinese art. By the mid-2000s, this art had become a hot commodity both inside and outside China. Many commercial galleries specializing in contemporary works appeared in major Chinese cities, and even the government organized contemporary art exhibitions to showcase its progressiveness. No longer recognized as avant-garde or alternative, contemporary art in today's China is defined mainly by medium-specificity and by its strong ties with the global sphere. Consequently, the distinction between it and other art systems is also becoming increasingly blurry.

Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Sphere

The close relationship between contemporary Chinese art and China's sweeping transformation has encouraged a kind of historical writing that traces the development of this art exclusively in its domestic context.³ While offering much valuable information, this history fails to document and explain the global presence of contemporary Chinese art and its growing contribution to a burgeoning international contemporary art. It is impossible simply to expand the domestic context of contemporary Chinese art into a global one, because these two spheres are governed by different forces and present different problems. Nor can one study contemporary Chinese art in either sphere in complete isolation. One goal of this book, therefore, is to observe how this art negotiates with these two spheres and to analyze how it changes its roles and aims in response to different spaces and audiences.

When contemporary Chinese art is presented in international exhibitions, its relationship with 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 to the period from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, when contemporary Chinese artists first appeared in foreign exhibitions 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 moved abroad for good.

These facts are well known, but their impact on the meaning of contemporary Chinese art remains understudied. This book interprets the recontextualization of this art as a reconstruction of its definition and identity. In other words, the decontextualization and recontextualization of contemporary Chinese art imply a shift in interpretation from its specific historical context to broad theoretical implications that can be applied to works created anywhere. While the term “contemporary Chinese art” remains the same, the purposes and strategies of this art have undergone crucial changes. On the most basic level, displacement and translation already alter a work’s significance. For example, within China’s domestic space, new art forms such as installation, performance, and site-specific art conveyed a strong sociopolitical message in the 1980s and 1990s. This significance largely disappears when these works are displayed in international exhibitions (such as the many biennials and triennials staged extravagantly around the world), which feature endless installation and multimedia works from different countries and regions. 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 painting, installation, performance, and multimedia art defy a rigid cultural identity. What they provide Chinese artists with 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 a local tradition into ready-made symbols and citations. The wide circulation of contemporary Chinese art brings this art to a global audience, but such circulation also removes it from its roots and erases its original historical significance. This new context challenges Chinese artists to compete with the best contemporary artists around the world, yet they can seldom avoid the audience’s expectation to find Chineseness in exotic, self-orientalizing forms.

Individualized Spaces of Contemporary Chinese Art

The third sphere of contemporary Chinese art comprises individualized spaces and channels generated by artists and curators through their independent projects and physical movement. Such spaces emerged together with contemporary Chinese art itself, as indicated by the appearance of many unofficial coterie exhibitions, organized by small groups of like-minded people, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. From 1984 on, local and individual groups of avant-garde artists began to contact one another to organize joint shows and activities, paving the way for a nationwide network independent of the art academies and artists’ associations. A new kind of individualized space was opened up when a “craze for going abroad” (*chuguo re*) besieged the Chinese art world from the late 1980s to early 1990s, which resulted in the exodus of more than a thousand young artists to foreign countries. Some of them—such as Wenda Gu (b. 1955), Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957), Huang Yong Ping (b. 1954), and Xu Bing (b. 1955)—soon established themselves in the foreign environment and began to appear in international exhibitions. Meanwhile, the end of the Cold War—an era of bitter rivalry between the Soviet bloc countries and the U.S.—created the possibility for them to stay in contact with artists in China and even to conduct art projects in their native country. Xu Bing, for example, returned to Beijing to stage a challenging performance (*A Case of Transference*) from 1993 to 1994; Cai Guo-Qiang realized his ambitious *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters* in 1993, when he lived in Japan; and Chen Zhen (b. 1955) journeyed home from Paris multiple times after 1993 and created *Social Investigation—Shanghai 1* in 1997. If such activities were still relatively rare in the 1990s, they became extremely common in the 2000s. As China’s political atmosphere has further relaxed, and living conditions have steadily improved, many expatriate artists have returned to China. Even those who maintain a residence in New York or Paris

have become increasingly involved in exhibitions in China. Besides the advantages of living in a familiar environment and speaking their mother tongue, China's cheap labor and materials, as well as an emerging domestic art market, have also contributed significantly to the return of these artists.

Thus 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 is in fact provided by artists themselves, who function not only as creators of contemporary Chinese art but also as mediators between the multiple spheres and identities of this art. Both expatriate and domestic artists share this communicative role. Although the so-called "domestic artists" never officially emigrated, many of them have also become world travelers since the 1990s. 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.

Because of the unsystematic nature of such individual movements, 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 unpredictable way. Despite its elusiveness, however, this sphere is most intimately connected with artistic creativity. This recognition demands close analyses of individual artists and their works. Unlike traditional "biographical" studies in art history, however, such analyses must show how artists internalize broad social and cultural issues in their works and how contemporaneity is constructed through an artist's engagement with the domestic and global spheres.

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By subjecting these three spheres to a coherent historical investigation, this book deconstructs the global/local dichotomy in interpreting contemporary Chinese art. It perceives this art as formed in separate yet interrelated spaces, as something whose content and definition change when artists and curators traverse and interact with these spaces. Tracing such permutations enables us to develop a

multidimensional narrative for contemporary Chinese art. In a broader sense, this narrative also helps interpret the growing phenomenon of "international contemporary art" in today's world, which encompasses various national brands of contemporary art. Instead of assuming that this type of contemporary art has developed from a modern to a postmodern phase in an unproblematic, linear fashion, this narrative 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.

Methodologically, this history makes use of three existing narrative modes in writing about contemporary Chinese art. The first mode frames this art within China's borders and follows the thread of domestic art events and movements.⁴ The second mode focuses on what this first approach leaves out, tracing the growth and impact of the diaspora of Chinese artists from the People's Republic in the global space.⁵ The third mode, a biographical one, analyzes the development of certain artists through individual case studies.⁶ Each mode has its advantages and implies a particular perspective in presenting the history of contemporary Chinese art. The first and second modes, in particular, are closely related to specific periods in this history. The "national" mode is most suitable for the period from the 1970 to the 1980s, when a nascent contemporary Chinese art emerged amid domestic political and economic reforms to challenge the art establishment. Only later did the "diasporic" mode become applicable to studying contemporary Chinese art, as large-scale emigration by artists took place mainly from the late 1980s to the 1990s. The strong overseas presence of contemporary Chinese art redefined the content of this art and complicates the historical narrative, because from this point onward contemporary Chinese art began to develop in multiple spaces and through regional and global interactions. In both cases, individual artists, as well as independent critics and curators, have played a decisive role in shaping the history of contemporary Chinese art; indeed one of the main purposes of this book is to define such roles by foregrounding the artists' unique experiences as much as possible. By synthesizing these different narrative modes based on specific historical situations, it is hoped that this book can present the various facets of contemporary Chinese art, explore its divergent components and complex orientations, and connect it to different places, temporalities, and subjectivities.

As a historical introduction to the subject, this book generally follows a chronological order and consists of three parts: the first focusing on the 1970s to the 1980s, the second on the 1990s, and the third on the 1990s to the 2000s. The 1989 Tiananmen Incident, which drastically altered artistic practices and discourses, separates Part One and Part Two. These two parts together offer a narrative of contemporary art inside China from the 1970s to 2000, with emphases on the sociopolitical and intellectual contexts, major art trends and movements, roles played by art critics and art academies, and various experiments in art form, subject matter, and exhibition. Part Three partially overlaps chronologically with Part Two so it can expand the narrative of the 1990s to encompass other important dimensions. One of these dimensions is the international presence of contemporary Chinese art and representative artists; another is the engagement of contemporary Chinese artists with the country's artistic and cultural heritage. The last chapter of the book is devoted to recent developments in contemporary Chinese art. Since the early 2000s, globalization and commercialization have spread this art far and wide, but these developments have also forced contemporary Chinese artists to face new challenges and dilemmas.

This book can be used together with *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, edited by the same author and published by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2010. As its title indicates, this companion volume provides English translations of original documents, including manifestos of avant-garde groups, eyewitness accounts of important exhibitions and art events, seminal critical and historical writings, and artists' reflections on their own work.