

### Three 1985: Absence as Contemporaneity

This lecture continues to explore the methodological potential of “reading absence” in analyzing and interpreting works of art. But it has two specific contexts in relation to the study of contemporary art, which differs from the study of art of the past in many ways. The first of these two contexts is the current discussion about the concept of the contemporary. Although the term “contemporary art” has been around for quite a while and now heads the titles of numerous museums, journals, and books, serious inquiry into its nature and theoretical components has only just begun. A clear sign of this emerging interest was a “contemporaneity workshop” held in October 2009 at the Clark Institute. Despite a conventional---and still dominant---view that contemporary art is proper province of critics, the organizers of the workshop claimed that it should also be the subject of historical and theoretical inquiry. Their confidence, I believe, lies in the simple fact that contemporary art has indeed left measurable historical tracks which can be traced to at least the 1960s in the West and to the 1980s in China. These different datings imply a basic premise behind any attempt to forge historical narratives of contemporary art. That is, contemporary art is from the beginning 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 has created innumerable ties to connect separate contemporary art practices---we recognize this reality in more than a hundred biennales and triennials around the world, the expansion of powerful transnational art galleries and auction houses, and journals

and magazines covering contemporary art events on a global scale. Instead of producing unified standards in evaluation and interpretation, however, the global circulation of art works, artists, curators, and exhibitions is simultaneously re-contextualized within specific locales or diasporas, thereby legitimating the seemingly paradoxical concept of “contemporary Chinese art.” I remember that several years ago, after giving a talk I was asked how an art could be both contemporary and Chinese. The person who asked 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 of the global and the local, and in the incessant temporal and spatial movements of images, concepts, and people in interconnected but never identical geo-cultural circles.

The second context of this talk is an ongoing effort to write history or histories of contemporary Chinese art. This art is still young, so such efforts have also just begun. When I was compiling Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents, a volume commissioned and published by MoMA last year, I started the book with this observation: “During the past twenty to thirty years, contemporary Chinese art has emerged as one of the liveliest and most creative trends within international contemporary art. Many exhibitions have introduced this art to a global audience, and the number of publications about it has also grown rapidly. Except in a few cases, however, most of these publications are exhibition catalogues and picture albums. No systematic introduction to contemporary Chinese art has yet been written in any Western language, and nearly all the relevant primary documents exist only in Chinese and are scattered

in hard-to-find publications.” Happily, this statement is no longer true today: not only does the MoMA volume now offer English translations of original documents organized in a historical framework, but two new books by Lü Peng and Gao Minglu each describe the history of contemporary Chinese art in considerable detail. (However I should also make it clear that neither book focuses on contemporary art exclusively and both frame this art within the general development of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese art.) Comparing these three publications, we find similar historical contours but marked differences in the definition and interpretation of key artistic phenomena. An important factor underlying such discrepancy is the authors’ different takes on the notion and expression of the contemporary. For example, when did a split between the contemporary and the modern occur in Chinese art? What are the symptoms and consequences of this split? Does the departure from the modern indicate new historical consciousness and self-awareness on the part of the artist? How does artistic creativity reflect or help construct the notion of the contemporary? Different answers to these questions, though not always explicit, necessarily influence, even determine, how one tells the story of contemporary Chinese art.

It is at this juncture that I can put forth my three goals in this lecture. In the next 40-50 minutes, I will first investigate the emergence of “contemporary” as a discursive term in early 90’s China and examine what historical shift this new term might signify. I will then trace the concept of the contemporary to a group of art projects in the second half of the 80s. Considered milestones in the history of contemporary Chinese art, these projects have been interpreted as products of a modern art movement called the ’85 Art New Wave. A careful reading of these works, however, reveals a quite different direction from the common

characterization of the New Wave movement as fueled by exuberant avant-gardism and collectivism. Most important, these projects were all attempted by individual artists, sometimes in prolonged solitude. More closely connected to the theme of this lecture series, nearly all of them embraced the notion of “absence” by erasing legible signs, tangible images, concrete objects, and distinct temporality. The result was a sharp rupture that is strictly temporary and contemporary. So how do we explain this phenomenon? My answer is that instead of endorsing the modernist agenda of the New Wave movement, these works should be thought of as critical reflections on the movement and as signals that a “contemporary turn” was beginning. In the last part of the talk I will leap to the mid to late 90s to analyze a parallel phenomenon. By then a new generation of experimental Chinese artists had emerged. They re-embraced the idea of “absence” as the conceptual and stylistic basis of their representations of the city and themselves. But what they reacted against was a different historical situation, in which an infant contemporary Chinese art was rapidly becoming a global commodity and threatened to lose its self-reflectivity.

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Since not everyone here is familiar with the history of contemporary Chinese art, I should provide some background information. Briefly, the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 cut off China and Chinese art from any outside influence. Western-style “modern art” ---xiandai yishu in Chinese---was banned from all exhibitions and publications. Chinese art and visual culture was dominated by a heavy-handed ideology, with images of Mao and the revolutionary masses filling all exhibition spaces and print media. But soon after

Mao died in 1976 and the Cultural Revolution was over, a new, unofficial art emerged in major cosmopolitan centers and eventually developed into a nationwide art movement around the mid-80s.

During this movement known as the '85 Art New Wave, more than a hundred art societies and collectives emerged all over the country. At the forefront of this movement was a group of young art critics, who considered themselves leaders of a delayed modernization movement which they traced to the early twentieth century. They held that this historical movement had started in the May Fourth Movement in 1919 with the goal to transform China based on the Western Enlightenment model. They also held that this modernization project was never completed in China because of the interruption of the Communist revolution. In their design, the main purpose of the '85 Art New Wave was therefore to reconnect Chinese art with the tradition of modern art and to reestablish the pivotal position of humanism and individualism in artistic creation. Influenced by this line of thinking and a new "culture fever" at the time, many artists in the New Wave movement eagerly embraced newly translated Western literature and philosophy, and made works based on reproduced Western images, which had become widely available in the 80s. Styles and theories that had long been eclipsed in the West were used by these artists as their direct models. The meaning of their works as "modern art" was located not in the original historical significance of these styles and ideas, but in the transference of these styles and ideas to a different time and place.

While the New Wave movement had a relatively clear starting date around 1985 with the nearly simultaneous emergence of dozens of art groups, it isn't

clear when it ended. The confusion is partially caused by the timing of an important exhibition in 1989. Called China/Avant-Garde in English and Xiandai Meishu Dazhan---or A Grand Exhibition of Modern Art in Chinese, this was the final project of the New Wave movement. To an outsider, this date seems to imply the continuation of the movement from 85 to 89. The problem, however, is that the exhibition was actually planned in 86 and delayed several times due to unfavorable political conditions. When it finally opened in February 89, even some of its organizers complained about the haphazard nature of the works on view. By this point, the collective optimism of the New Wave movement had also largely gone. The organizers and participants of the exhibition turned the National Art Gallery into a solemn site resembling a mausoleum. Long black carpets, extending from the street to the exhibition hall, bore a “No-U-turn” traffic sign signaling “There’s no turning back.” The feeling of tragic heroism was closely related to the political situation of the time. Three months after the exhibition, the Tiananmen student demonstrations took place and ended in bloodshed.

Chinese art after 89 had a very different appearance: the energy of an organized avant-garde movement was entirely gone. In its place emerged decentralized art projects conducted by individual artists or a few like-minded people.

Instead of recapturing the spirit of a mass movement, independent critics and curators now dedicated themselves to establishing a commercial infrastructure for unofficial art. This was also the moment when this art began to attract global attention, appearing in important international exhibitions as well as major Western newspapers and magazines. It was exactly around this time, starting from the early 90s, that the term dangdai yishu or “contemporary art” popped up

on book covers and in exhibition titles, replacing xiandai or “modern” to become the preferred word for what was new, novel, and cosmopolitan. No serious effort was made to justify this term, however. Reading documents from that period, one gets the feeling that the term “contemporary art” quietly emerged on its own, without any particular theoretical articulation or political endorsement. Instead of proclaiming a consensual agenda as “the modern” had done, the new term seems to defy any ideological or political commitment.

Many writers have tried to explain the difference between 80s’ and 90s’ Chinese art. Some have attributed the changes to the new political and economic environment of the 90s; others have emphasized the impact of the intensifying globalization process. In my view these are all important contextual factors. But the changing designation of unofficial art from “modern” to “contemporary” points to an internal shift in the artists’ vision of their art and of themselves. I would further suggest that this shift did not occur suddenly in the early 90s as a direct consequence of the Tiananmen incident and globalization. A reexamination of Chinese art from 86 to 89, a project which I have been pursuing these past few years in collaboration with some Chinese scholars, has begun to show a picture which is far more complex than previously painted. In this new picture, the overall “modern” identity and agenda of the New Wave movement appears to be a theoretical construct articulated by the academic leaders of the movement; the actual movement had much more complex components and diverse directions. Moreover, almost as soon as the movement started and was entrusted with a general modernist mission, it produced not only simulations of Western images but also deconstructions of a wide range of existing images both Western and Chinese. Although most unofficial artists during this period started as members of

avant-garde groups, some of them soon developed projects that defied the prescribed direction of the movement and distinguished their individual status. . . As I mentioned earlier, many of these projects embraced the idea of “absence” by erasing readable texts, tangible images, concrete objects, and any distinct temporality. Together they demonstrate a powerful shift from asserting a fixed ideological position to erasing the meaning of any given form. This shift then resulted in many “empty signs” with the goal to restore a ground zero in artistic creation.

A forerunner of this trend is Wang Guangyi. Most people know his later Political Pop paintings from the early 90s; but his most creative years were actually in the mid to late 80s. In 84 he co-founded the Northern Art Group in Manchuria and emerged as a key advocate of the '85 Art New Wave. He was then a passionate reader of Western modern philosophy, and referenced famous works from Western art in his early paintings. But even in its heyday, the Northern Art Group championed the aesthetic of the frozen North and created still and dark images that rejected any revolutionary passion. Wang Guangyi's painting in particular appropriated famous images in Western art history, a tendency which further led him to superimpose geometric grids onto semi-abstract shapes. According to him, the grids signify rational analysis aimed at discarding humanist sentiment. At first he limited such rational analysis to Western classical examples. A turning point was reached in 88, when he subjected Mao to such analyses, finally resulting in two series of large Mao portraits in red and gray. Modeled on Mao's official visage on Tiananmen, the portraits appear beneath grids of straight lines. Such grids were a conventional means to enlarge Mao's portrait during the Cultural Revolution, but they have now risen from



underneath the painted surface to constitute a non-traversable barrier between Mao and the audience. These paintings have been mistakenly interpreted as Wang's expression of anti-Communist liberalism. But as the critic Huang Zhuan has argued, their real target was actually "humanist passion" (renwen reqing) in any mass movement, including the '85 Art New Wave itself.

Also from 1986, Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Wu Shanzhuan, three young artists who would soon become major representatives of contemporary Chinese art, started to deconstruct Chinese written language by filling their works with "fake" characters, resulting in various kinds of empty linguistic signs which have been called "pseudo writing" or "anti-writing." Significantly, all three artists abandoned any Western model and found their materials in indigenous sources. Among them, Wu Shanzhuan's works evoked the visuality of the Cultural Revolution, but turned Big Character Posters and revolutionary stamps and slogans into illegible signs. Xu Bing and Wenda Gu were known for their familiarity with traditional aesthetics. Gu created a series of "pseudo calligraphy" using trained brushwork. Xu invented and carved several thousand characters to print beautiful Ming-style books. Underlying these individual projects was a tremendous effort to divorce "form" from "content." In addition, Xu Bing's Book from the Sky best represents the shift from a collective movement to individual artistic experiments.

As you probably know, these printed books by Xu Bing are unreadable even by native Chinese because all the characters are fake. But the books' composition, printing, and binding are strictly traditional. In the first exhibition of this work in 1988, multiple copies of the books lay on the floor in rows. Large paper sheets

printed with the same characters covered a wall and hung from the ceiling. Although the visual impact of *Book from the Sky* is instantaneous, the project's prime significance lies in its painstaking creation over the course of several years. Xu Bing himself discussed the meaning of such "wasted time" in a 1989 essay, which contains this anecdote:

One of my painter friends once told me about a "crazy" guy in his home village, who always went out to collect waste paper at a certain hour, washing the pieces of paper in a river, carefully mounting them piece by piece, and then storing them under his bed after they had become dry and flat. I thought quite a long time about this person's behavior. Finally I realized that it was a kind of *qigong*--a kind of cultivation of the *Tao*. It was indeed a very powerful kind of *qigong*. [It exemplifies] an Eastern way of achieving true knowledge--obtaining sudden enlightenment and correspondence with Nature by endlessly experiencing a fixed point. . . .

Here we find a radical difference between Xu Bing and the advocates of the '85 Art New Wave. The latter envisioned the New Wave as a grand historical movement with a universal agenda, but Xu constructed an interior time and space through meaningless repetition. The idea of evolution was rejected; instead he imagined a moment of private enlightenment outside the flow of history, symbolized by the creation and accumulation of meaningless words.

Suspicious of literary meaning, Book from the Sky rendered the text empty but emphasized the formal beauty of the book. But Huang Yong Ping's 1987 installation, "The History of Chinese Art" and "A Concise History of Modern Painting" after Two Minutes in the Washing Machine, destroyed form and

content together. As the title indicates, Huang machine-washed two art history books. The first was by the senior Chinese art historian Wang Bomin and had been widely used as a standard textbook in Chinese art schools. The second book, by British art critic and historian Herbert Read, was one of the few introductions to modern Western art available at the time in Chinese translation, and was well-known among New Wave artists in the 80s. Putting these two books through a two-minute cycle in a washing machine, Huang Yong Ping produced a pile of paper pulp as his response to the enigma that had preoccupied generations of modern Chinese intellectuals and artists: How to position themselves between tradition and modernity and between East and West? Instead of providing another idealistic solution, Huang challenged the premise of the question by eliminating the binary concepts. No lengthy debate was needed or possible, as the joint remains of the two books simultaneously destroyed and united histories and traditions.

Another canonical work from this reflective trend was Wu Shanzhan's 86 installation Red Humor. Constructed as a windowless room covered with layers of torn paper and pieces of writing, it alluded to Big Character Posters, a major form of political writing during the Cultural Revolution. But the installation did not simply restage a vanished historical environment, because the words on the walls were no longer the revolutionary slogans fashionable during the 60s and 70s, but commercial ads that began to fill Chinese newspapers and public spaces from the mid-80s. In Wu's simulation of Big Character Posters, therefore, past and present, memory and reality merged into a single moment. The result was a supra-historical temporality that could be recognized as the contemporary.

Now let me leap to the mid-90s. I should say that this is not how the history of contemporary Chinese art is normally told. Most books on the subject, including some of my own, divide this history into the '80s and '90s and separate these two decades with the cataclysmic moment of 1989. I have just questioned this periodization by pushing the “contemporary turn” back to the 80s. Now I want to highlight another crucial reorientation in contemporary Chinese art, which took place from the mid to late 90s. No serious study has been devoted to this period, as most writers have focused on the early 90s that followed the Tiananmen incident. The mid-90s, however, saw a new kind of creative energy in contemporary Chinese art, including strong interest in social issues and self-representation, in representing the city and restaging historical memory, in experimental various forms of exhibitions and creating versatile exhibition spaces, and in new art forms such as performance, installation, video, photography, and site-specific work. Particularly relevant to this lecture, the notion of absence regained its centrality in artistic representation. Many works from this period displayed mutilated residential houses and extensive urban ruins, empty human forms and blurry faces, and historical sites echoing with memories. The most extreme projects rendered the artist’s own body as mere art materials. All these works were created inside China, not for international exhibition and the market. They were shown in informal, underground exhibitions mainly to fellow artists. I have termed this reorientation a “domestic turn.” I hope that it will be more carefully studied because of its pivotal importance in understanding contemporary Chinese art during the past 15 years. Such a study would require serious research involving time-consuming archival research, since many art

projects and exhibitions need to be rediscovered and documented. Today I can only discuss a few examples and provide a general historical contextualization.

To some artists, this “domestic turn” is real and biographical. Zhang Dali, for example, escaped to Italy in 89 but returned to China in 95 as a graffiti artist. By 98 he had sprayed more than 2,000 bald heads---his own image---all over Beijing. Most of these heads appeared on ruined residential houses, which were being demolished to make rooms for modern hotels, shopping malls, and grand avenues. Before long he also invented a new graffiti style by carving out the bricks inside a sprayed head, creating a gaping hole to expose the view behind it. The nature of such work thus subtly shifted from graffiti to site-specific performance and photography. This photograph of his, for example, contrasts the fate of two kinds of traditional architecture: while the ruined residential house in the foreground tells the sad state of vernacular architecture, the mirage-like pavilion one sees through the head-shaped hole belongs to the former imperial palace under state protection. By carving his own image onto the half-demolished house, Zhang Dali both identified himself with the disappearing vernacular architecture and participated in its destruction. The vacant self-image is therefore a protest as well as a lament, because as part of a ruined house it was meant to be destroyed with the past, not to be expanded into the future. Zhang once told me: “Walking alone inside a destroyed house I hear tiles breaking under my feet. The sound seems to come from inside of me. I am part of this vanishing scene.” There was no desire to cross this wasteland. Instead, he saw himself from a future-past perspective as a memory in the making. As he continued: “With the development of Beijing my graffiti images will eventually disappear on their own. But they will leave a trace of memory---a dialogue between an artist and this city.”

We find a similarly self-effacing attitude and suspended temporality in many other works from that period. Here is Zhan Wang's Temptation, a series of tortured figures which are actually empty shells without a real body to feel pain. Sometimes he displayed these figures in a ruined building and took photographs. The pictures recall wartime ruins; but the resemblance is deliberately superficial because the figures are fake mannequins, and even the ruin appears as a stage set under artificial lights. The missing subject is sometimes identified as the artist himself. Sui Jianguo's site-specific installation, The Relocation of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, is the best example of this type. To make a long story short, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the country's top art school, was located near Wangfujing, the most famous commercial district in Beijing. In 1994, the school was informed that it had to move to a new location within the next few months because its campus was slotted for commercial development. There was some protest attempted by the teachers and students, but before long the school's northern section, where the Department of Sculpture had its classrooms, was demolished. Sui Jianguo, then an assistant professor in the department, cleared and paved the ground of a non-existent classroom, arranged rows of empty chairs, a desk, and two bookcases filled with broken bricks. "This is not a protest," he told a small audience gathered there, "because we are no longer here."

I can give you many more examples: Yin Xiuzhen's mass-grave of demolished houses; Rong Rong's haunting images of ruined neighborhoods and damaged photographs; Song Dong's moving performance in deserted Tiananmen Square; Lin Tianmiao's self-portraits, which stripped off personal attributes and gender identity, (the same artist also transformed her own household into an opaque, imageless world); Jin Feng's photograph in which he gradually blocked

his image with his own writing; Zhu Yu's iconoclastic performance in which he turned his own body into a site of destruction. But time is up and I still need to address a crucial question: Why? ---Why does the feeling of disappearance, erasure, and emptiness---absence in general---so strongly permeate these works? My answer to this question, which also concludes this lecture, is that this "domestic turn" in the mid and late 90s emerged as Chinese artists' response to the globalization and commercialization of contemporary Chinese art and as their effort to reconnect this art with real social and political issues in contemporary China.

I mentioned earlier that the 90s saw many changes in contemporary Chinese art, the most fundamental one being its transformation from a self-contained domestic art movement into a fast growing branch of international contemporary art. In addition to increased global exposure through exhibitions and publications, many Chinese artists travelled to the West and settled down in New York, Paris, and Berlin, where they joined other international artists and directly responded to global problems. No less significant, some pictorial styles created inside China, such as Political Pop and Cynical Realism, were codified in the early 90s as readily recognizable "brands" of contemporary Chinese art for a global audience. The success and misinterpretation of these styles indicated that contemporary Chinese art was now subject to a process of simultaneous de-contextualization and re-contextualization that constantly reconstructed its definition and identity. While the term "contemporary Chinese art" remained the same, its meaning and purpose underwent crucial changes in the global sphere. The circulation of Chinese art brought it to an international audience, but at the same time removed it from its roots and real social engagement. Once we realize

this new condition, we can understand why works created in the “domestic turn” so sharply contrasted with those brand names of contemporary Chinese art, which were then traveling on multiple international tours. Taking the form of installation, performance, and site-specific projects, these “domestic” works had little commercial value and did not circulate beyond their immediate locality. Also contrary to Political Pop and Cynical Realist paintings, they rejected fixed iconography and pictorial formula and gained their meaning through such rejection. Ironically, as works of Political Pop and Cynical Realism continued to journey around the world in prolonged traveling exhibitions (one of these exhibitions called China’s New Art, Post-89 originated in Hong Kong in 1993 and traveled to nine different venues in Australia, Canada, and the United States over the next six years), these colorful and striking images became completely disconnected from China’s reality; what they presented to the global audience was a false sense of immediacy and rebellion. In contrast, the vacant and incomplete images from the “domestic turn” were full of meaning, as they self-consciously reflected upon renewed conditions of contemporaneity with a sense of urgency. In this way they also echoed those remarkable works created some ten years previously during the ’85 New Wave Movement, which had marked the beginning of contemporary art in China.

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Now at the end of this lecture series, I want to briefly review the three lectures and highlight my main argument. A shared purpose of these lectures, as I have repeated several times, is explore the methodological potential of “reading absence.” Here “absence” is understood in a dialectical relationship between



depicting and de-picting. The general idea is that instead of providing visual information about the subjects represented, certain images, installations, and performances deliberately erase or withhold such information. Since such phenomena are seen throughout the history of world art, we need to explore the reason for creating such works as “empty signs” and their expected reception.] In my lectures I have tried to use this approach in discussing three pivotal moments in later Chinese art. My first lecture dealt with early modern China. By analyzing the painted image of a stone stele, I tried to demonstrate how this image, though deliberately “empty” in temporality and literary content, conveyed complex political and psychological meanings at the time of Ming-Qing transition. The second lecture focused on two groups of photographs made by Felice Beato and Milton Miller during and immediately after the Second Opium War in 1860 and 1861. I tried to show how these images feature death in various ways, through depicting military conquest, empty space left by looting and burning, and anonymous sitters arranged as posthumous portraits. The third lecture, which you just heard, provides a revisionist narrative of contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s and 1990s. In this narrative, notions and representations of “absence,” including erasure, emptying, and disappearance, characterize two transformative stages of this art and reveal the need to constantly erase consensual meaning in order to generate frustrated energy to fuel new ventures. Throughout these lectures, therefore, “reading absence” is meant to explain the tension between presence and absence as a specific artistic and art historical phenomenon. While providing a particular angle to analyze works of art, such reading also leads to new contextual and historical interpretation. This is the basic proposal I have tried to lay out to you in this group of lectures.