Tui-Transfiguration is an exhibition I curated in Beijing's Factory 798 in September 2003. In terms of content, it displayed twelve series of photographs that Rong Rong and Inri had created over the past ten years, and can be considered a retrospective of these two artists. But I also conceived and designed the show as an "experimental exhibition" that posed questions about the language, site, audience, and function of an art exhibition itself. These two purposes are not separate. In fact, the ultimate goal of this project was to create a symbiosis between the show's content and location: whereas Rong Rong and Inri's photographs largely represent their intimate interactions with urban and natural environments, the exhibition's site - an abandoned factory shop - tells a story about Beijing and China. Bringing these two stories into a coherent visual display, the exhibition reinforced their messages and created an artistic space with which the audience could interact.

Experimental Exhibitions in Contemporary Chinese Art

An "experimental exhibition" is an exhibition in which the focus of experimentation has shifted from individual art objects to the exhibition itself: its site, form, and social role. My interest in this type of exhibition - the relationship between artists and society, the public role of experimental art, and how to "normalize" or "legalize" this art in a changing political environment - started in 1999-2000, when I spent a year in China studying contemporary Chinese art in its social context. A central problem, one that generated much energy and creativity among independent curators, art critics, and experimental artists at the time, was how to exhibit experimental art publicly. Although some artists still favored "closed shows"
as a form of private communication among themselves, the dominant choice in 1999 and 2000 was “to go public.” The advocates of this approach hoped that by finding new channels to bring experimental art into the public sphere, they could undermine the prohibitions imposed upon this art. They also hoped that these new channels would eventually constitute a social basis for the normalization of contemporary art, so that this art could also contribute to China’s ongoing social transformation.

At least four factors encouraged this trend, including (1) the deepening globalization of Chinese experimental art, (2) a crisis in the official exhibition system, (3) the appearance of new types of exhibition space as a consequence of China’s socioeconomic transformation, and (4) the emergence of independent curators and their growing influence on the development of experimental art. These factors interacted, contributing to new types of exhibitions that were planned to expand existing exhibition spaces and to forge new exhibition channels. Because these exhibitions were, to a large degree, social experiments and because their results still remained to be seen, I call them “experimental exhibitions.”

Among such exhibitions organized around 2000, the most interesting ones took place in versatile, non-exhibition spaces, bringing works of experimental art to the public in a dynamic, guerrilla-fashion. The exhibition Supermarket (Chao shi, also known in English as Art for Sale), for example, took place in a large shopping mall in downtown Shanghai; Beijing’s fashionable Club Vogue bar became the site of the exhibition Art as Food (Food Art) during the opening of the largest “furniture city” in Shanghai, customers had the opportunity to see a huge experimental art exhibition, called Home (Bar), on the shop’s enormous fourth floor. That these three site-specific exhibitions all used commercial spaces reflected the curators’ interest in a “mass commercial culture,” which in their view had become a major moving force in contemporary Chinese society. While affiliating experimental art with this culture, their exhibitions also provided channels for artists to comment on this culture.

Other site-specific exhibitions were staged in non-commercial, public spaces, including parks, subway stations, demolition sites, and streets. An outstanding example in this group was Trace of Existence (Shenghu tongzi), held in an abandoned factory site in the east suburbs of Beijing. Feng Boyi explained the significance of this site in his catalogue essay: “We hope to transform this informal and closed private space into an open space for creating and exhibiting experimental art. This location allows our exhibition to make the transition from urban space to countryside in a geographical sense and from center to border in a cultural sense. This location mirrors the peripheral position of experimental art in China.”

As demonstrated by these examples, an experimental exhibition in China is a site-specific event that involves two kinds of interactions: the interaction between the artists (and their works) and the site, and the interaction between the audience and the show. The curator realizes his or her role in making these interactions happen. Such an exhibition is therefore by definition a joint social/artistic phenomenon. Rather than simply displaying a group of art
works in a public or private space, it aims to bring a nexus of social relationships into play and to make itself a contested social event. It also offers advocates of experimental art a means to expand their influence in a rapidly changing society. A major aspiration of independent Chinese curators and experimental artists is therefore to discover new exhibition spaces and to transform old exhibition spaces for the sake of contemporary art. When I decided to curate the exhibition "Fair-Transfiguration" in Factory 798, I linked it to this tradition of experimental exhibitions in contemporary Chinese art, but dealt with a set of issues that were specific to the content and site of this particular project.

Factory 798 as an Art Space

Factory 798 was one of several state-run factories located in a one-square-kilometer industrial area at Dashanzi in east Beijing; the others included 718, 797, 751, 706, and 708. I used the past tense in this opening sentence because though these factories still exist, they have largely ceased production. I first visited the place in 2001, when Mr. Yukihito Tabata of the Tokyo Gallery invited me to see the future location of his new Beijing venue, called the Beijing Tokyo Art Projects. I was impressed by the gallery's open, Bauhaus-style architecture, but was truly astonished by the whole area - a giant industrial plant from the Maoist era that had turned into gloomy ruins. Huang Rui, who had moved into the area earlier and found the location for the Tokyo Gallery, guided us through seemingly endless empty factory shops. I was in awe; the spaces, huge as indoor football grounds, were shadowy and echoing. Silent and lifeless, they nevertheless preserved rich historical memories. Designed by East Germans in 1954, this group of factories once housed the largest munitions manu-

facturing operations in China. A shining example of the collaboration between Socialist "brother countries" led by the Soviet Union. It also showcased China's future in Mao's vision - an advanced Socialist state based on heavy industry and Communist ideology. The opening of the factory was celebrated with great fanfare, with senior leaders from East Germany and China present at the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Factory 798 became more closely linked to China's domestic politics from the late 1950s, after the country's relationship with the Soviet Union soured. The socialist brotherhood abruptly fell apart, and China suffered especially from the failure of the Great Leap Forward, devastating famines, and the withdrawal of all financial and technological support from her former allies. Slogans still visible on the factory's peeling walls, including "Regenerate the country's vitality with our own strength; work with all our determination to make the country strong" (zhengxiang, xianlai ziyuan), testify to the Party's effort to mobilize the Chinese people to overcome a difficult period of isolation.

As soon as the Chinese economy recovered a little the Cultural Revolution broke out. The country went through an even worse period of political chaos; but Factory 798 experienced a spiritual renaissance. When Mao told the country that "The proletarian class should occupy the superstructure," workers were dispatched from this and other Beijing factories to take over the leadership of all the universities and cultural institutions in China's capital. That was indeed the third and last glorious period in 1950s history - a moment that is again attested to by writings on the factory's ruined walls. Mostly Maoist quotations and slogans praising the god-like wisdom of the Great Helmsman, the red characters of this revolutionary graffiti are today treasured by interior decorators of the trendy galleries and cafes, which have populated the area in the past two to three years.

What I saw on my trip to 798 in 2001, then, was the beginning of a process that has transformed the place from an industrial facility into an "art space" in China's capital. The ultimate reason for this transformation must be found in China's socioeconomic reforms since the Cultural Revolution. Starting in the late 1970s, a new generation of Chinese leaders initiated a series of reforms to develop a market economy, a more resilient social system, and an "open door" diplomatic policy that opened China to foreign investment as well as cultural influence. The consequence of these changes is now most acutely felt in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai: the cityscape has been completely reshaped; numerous private and joint-venture businesses, including private-owned art galleries, have appeared. Educated young men and women move from job to job pursuing personal well-being, while a large "floating population" keeps entering metropolitan centers from the countryside to look for work and better living conditions.

A direct consequence of these social changes in Beijing has been the drastic decline of state-owned heavy industry and the rapid rise of the commercial, tourist, and entertainment sectors. In particular, the Chaoyang district, where Factory 798 is located, has become the most cosmopolitan area in the capital, largely due to its strategic position as the home of foreign embassies and many international companies. From the early 1990s, this district has also attracted an increasing number of "independent artists" (xi yishu) with no direct institutional affiliation. Many of them have come from the provinces. To this generation of experimental artists, the Cultural Revolution has become remote past, and their works often directly respond to China's current transformation. They find stimuli in a place like Chaoyang, which is sensitive to social changes and also presents economic opportunities. Thus, although Beijing's earliest "artists' village" (huixuan cun) was established in Yuanying yuan in the western suburbs, the gravity soon shifted to the east side of the city. The East Village community emerged in the early 1990s. Many Yuanyingyuan artists moved to Tongxiao east of Chaoyang; and they were followed by more freelance artists looking for cheap studio space in an increasingly expensive city. The relocation of the Central Academy of Fine Arts from the inner city to Wangjing next to the Fourth Ring Road helped attract more artists to the Chaoyang district.

The rebirth of Factory 798 as an art space owes something to all these conditions - Beijing's general globalization and de-industrialization, the cosmopolitan culture of the Chaoyang district, and the concentration of experimental artists in the area. The joint force of these conditions also distinguishes this place from the previous art spaces in Beijing. Although still in an early stage of development, it has demonstrated its potential to integrate previously separate spaces and institutions related to a burgeoning contemporary art - galleries, publishers, artists' studios, performance centers, design firms, showrooms, restaurants, and bars. As the base of a new community of independent artists, it is no longer situated in a rural or semi-rural area, but is geographically and culturally connected to Beijing's expanding downtown.

On the other hand, 798 is not yet completely assimilated into Beijing's established cultural and economic scenes. Its attraction lies, in fact, in its reputation as the city's newest "cultural frontier," which both generates the excitement for
exploration and offers financial opportunities. Its reuse of an abandoned industrial site is reminiscent of New York’s SoHo or Chelsea. But because of the explosive speed of China’s urban development, it is likely that the emerging art space at Dashanzi will be developed in a much shorter period. This future, however, is not guaranteed and still depends on the official decision about the fate of the place. Will the factories be destroyed to make room for lucrative apartment buildings and shopping malls? Or will they be transformed into a lively “contemporary art district” - a space Beijing still lacks and desperately needs? At this moment no one has the definite answer. But a group of activists - artists, curators, publishers, and gallery owners - have been working hard to save the factories for the sake of contemporary art. To this end, any creative art project taking place here, including the exhibition I curated last year, is part of this collective effort.

**An Exhibition as a Visual Narrative**

*Transfiguration* took place in an abandoned factory shop in 798 that is approximately 65 meters long, 32 meters wide, and 14 meters high. Because this was the first art exhibition staged here, it in effect transformed the shop into a public “art space.” To realize the shop’s enormity one should not think of it as an individual building, but as a “container” of groups of architectural structures and machines. Originally, a 30-meter long kiln, like a giant tank, lay in the middle of the space and was connected to a huge chimney at one end. The kiln had been destroyed before the exhibition, but the chimney still stood amidst rusted machines and industrial waste. Other remains from the past included Mao’s words painted on the walls, broken windows hanging on the ceiling, and some free-standing buildings with boarded-up windows. A row of two-level houses stood opposite the chimney. Most of its rooms were filled with junk; the factory’s security guards used the two small rooms near the shop’s gate as a hangout.

It is difficult to imagine a place more unsuitable for displaying two-dimensional works of art. But since my purpose was to create an interactive, “site-specific” exhibition, not a standard photography show, the challenge became how to merge the photographs and the architecture into a flow of images and spaces around a central concept. This concept - a temporal progression from death to rebirth - underlay both the photographic works and the transformation of 798, and united the exhibition’s content and site. In preparing the show I interviewed the artists and analyzed their art - its stylistic and thematic development, and its relationship with the artist’s lives. This study provided a narrative structure, which was then internalized and enhanced by the exhibition. The transition from a textual analysis to a spatial presentation was realized through reinterpreting the existing architectural space and constructing various architectonic frames with different materials. The result was a series of spaces with shifting images and materials.

**Space Two: Transformation**

Figurative representations took over in the second section of the exhibition, which included three photo-series by Iri (1999, Tokyo, Grey Zones, and Maxima) and one by Rong Rong (East Village). All the figures in these photographs respond to their immediate urban environments, whether a nightly Tokyo street, a public toilet in Beijing’s suburbs,
or a sealed room in a nondescript apartment building. None of their actions can be translated literally into words, however. Rather, these are spontaneous expressions of confusion, alienation, and exhilaration. In her Greniche 1999, Tokyo, in her words, represents "illusions born from the radiation of darkness - a symphony of the changing light and shadow." What these and other images convey is a vague sense of happening - something begins to emerge from the ruins. Then there is a constant feeling of struggle. Rong Rong's East Village records memorable performances by the Village's struggling artists - performances that move the viewer with the performers' pain and desire. Jinli's explanation of her Grey Zone concludes with this sentence: "To struggle free from hopelessness, to stay alive in a desert-like world: this is the meaning of the Grey Zone."

These images thus promise a transformation but do not demonstrate a rebirth. Because "transformation" was the central concept of the exhibition, these works were installed in the central section of the factory shop, on the empty ground left by the bygone kiln. The photographs were displayed on both sides of large panels, planted in the ground as freestanding screens. Unlike the previous section of the exhibition, a new architectural material - frosted glass - was used to make the panels. Shimmering in the decaying factory shop with a faint greenish tint, these panels symbolized a new life growing out of the baked soil. The panels formed broad arches one leading to another, guiding the audience forward along a spiral path. The first three series of photographs on the panels were all black-and-white, but the fourth one, Jinli's Maxilax, was brightly colored. This series concluded the section also because it most acutely represents the subject's emotional awakening - a transformation that finally leads to rebirth accompanied by uncontrollable joy and pain.

Space Three: Rebirth

Beauty and youth becomes the dominant theme of the third section of the exhibition, which features two groups of collaborative works that Rong Rong and Jinli created after they had found each other and fallen in love. As if reborn from ruins, nature, still unspoiled, comes back to life. The two photographers embrace this amazing world. Harmony has triumphed; struggle has subsided. Sensual pleasure has returned to supply the main purpose for artistic creation; even the frozen, frightening winter landscape of Mt. Fuji can only inspire joy.

These two groups of photographs, one shot in various scenic spots around the world and the other on the frozen lake under Mt. Fuji, were organized into two architectural spaces in the exhibition. The doubling of the space aimed to create subtle layers and to reinforce the sense of transition. The first space centered on a large gauze curtain, hung across the entire width of the factory shop and behind the glass panels in Part Two. While and see-through, this curtain served multiple structural and expressive purposes. First, gently dividing the factory shop into two halves, it alluded to a subtle conceptual shift in the exhibition's narrative from transformation to rebirth. Second, in contrast with the hard,
industrial glass panels in the previous section, the soft, domestic material of the curtain evoked a sense of intimacy and attachment to life. Third, while providing a surface on which a group of pictures were hung in this section, the curtain also delayed access to the exhibition’s climax - the Mt. Fuji series comprised of thirteen large light boxes. Immaterial and seemingly created by light itself, this last group of images concluded the exhibition, which had gradually evolved from death to rebirth and from destruction to reconstruction.

In addition to these three parts, a fourth group of photographs - many self-portraits that Rong Rong and Ini had created over the years - were displayed on the two side walls of the factory shop. In this position, they constituted an independent sequence of self-representation while relating the three “spaces” in the middle into a dynamic whole.

An Experimental Exhibition as an Intellectual/Artistic Project

One of my earlier “experimental exhibitions” was called Cancelled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China. Shown in 2000 in Chicago, it re-presented and interpreted a previous exhibition - RV Me (Shi wo) curated by Long Lin in Beijing in late 1998. The accompanying catalogue discusses the changing art scene in China and documents some important “experimental exhibitions” organized over the past 5 years. In a review of this exhibition and the catalogue, James Elkins calls the whole project, quite pointedly, “a new kind of hybrid between art practice, museum installation, historiography, and social history.” In such an exhibition, according to him, the curator positions himself between creative art, art history, art criticism, and curatorial and museum practices. For the same reason, he thinks that I should have defined my roles in the project more explicitly, because in his view, such interventions on the part of the curator indicate new directions for both museum exhibitions and art historical writing.

I am in complete agreement with his analysis and criticism, and have tried to articulate such interventions in Tai-Transfiguration more forcefully. It should have become clear by now that to me, an “experimental exhibition” like this one should have a clear social message: its structure should reflect a serious study of both the content and site of the exhibition; and its installation should be an artistic/intellectual project in its own right, internalizing and reinforcing the exhibition’s central concept. In this light I want to return to the title of Tai-Transfiguration, which I explained at the beginning of the introduction to the exhibition:

In classical Chinese, tai refers to the biological process in which certain arthropods and reptiles shed their skins while growing and transforming. From this root meaning the character has gained two general significances. First, it denotes a profound change in one’s life that amounts to rebirth. In particular, chuan tai - the sloughing of the cicada’s skin - has become synonymous with the achievement of immortality through discarding the impermanent human body. Second, tai also signifies the physical remains left after such transformation. A host of compound words related to this usage, including tai yi (sloughed-off shell), tai yi (sloughed-off clothes), and tai zhi (sloughed-off material), all pertain to death but also convey the hope for a transcendent, albeit elusive, afterlife.