6

Chan Meets Dada

Merging Destruction and Tradition in the Avant-Garde Mentality

Guannian Gengxin: Revolution in Ideas

The Chinese term *guannian* means "idea." Around late 1984 and early 1985, *guannian gengxin* became the most popular notion among the avant-gardists and the younger generation. It even had an impact on the circle of middle-aged academic artists. *Guannian gengxin* literally means to have a "revolution in ideas." After the Open Door policy and new painting trends emerged in the prior several years, the change of ideas became a fundamental issue in the development of Chinese contemporary art, as opposed to the mere substitution of themes or style. But what is *guannian* in the particular Chinese context? It first refers to a desire for further cultural exchange between China and the West. With a strong voice advocating greater openness and freedom in the creation of art, it became a common point of view in the literary and art worlds during the middle of the 1980s.[1] It entailed a pursuit of revolutionary ideas in the creation of art, rather than emphasizing material production. In this context, "ideas" are not concepts in the sense of Western conceptual art; rather it is concerned with promoting an avant-garde cultural revolution, often highly critical, in art.

Apart from the influential trend of a specifically Chinese form of humanism (*renwen*), discussed in the previous chapter, this avant-garde of ideas became the most radical art propagated by the '85 Movement. It first emerged in the middle of the 1980s, in tandem with the *renwen* tendencies of the '85 Movement. In my historic essay defining the '85 Movement, I divided the avant-garde groups into three elements. The first two were the previously discussed rationalist painting and current of life tendencies, which passionately engaged in "enthusiastic humanism" (*renwen jingshen*). The third element manifested as what I called a "revolution of ideas imbued with activism" (*guannian gengxin yu xingwei zhuyi*).[2]

The phenomenon of a revolution in ideas in the '85 Movement was inspired by Western contemporary art, including conceptual art, the name given to a North American and British art movement of the 1960s and 1970s. However, as usual in the Chinese context, the purpose and the revolutionary logic are different from the Euro-American if one examines the comparative situations with any specificity.

The term "conceptual art" was translated into Chinese in two ways in the 1980s: "idea art" (*guannian yishu*) and "concept art" (*gainian yishu*). *Guannian* carries with it a much broader set of connotations than *gainian*. The former refers to the general meaning of mind-based or thought-based practice in a particular context, while the latter has a narrower definition of a specific notion. Chinese conceptual art is more accurately defined as idea art (*guannian yishu*), because the artists working in this vein were committed to examining broad cultural and social issues, rather than focusing on the internal concerns of art itself, as was the case in the first phase of Western conceptual art practiced during the late 1960s. For instance, the Art and Language group attempted to probe the relationship between words, objects, and images while studying the signification theories of French theorists such as Saussure, or later of Wittgenstein. In Chinese art, there has never been a theory that attempts to divide words from images, or study them separately. Due to the integral nature of calligraphic history, and the essential allegorical, metaphorical, and poetic coupling of words and images in the history of Chinese art, there is no Western historical relationship that can

accommodate this equivalency. In some Chinese idea art, such as that of Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, or Wu Shanzhuan, images and words are resolved into one holistic concept. This is partially because the Chinese language is itself based on pictographic images, with no separation between word and image. I will discuss this issue in the next chapter.

It is also important to note that, unlike its Western counterpart, idea art in China did not develop from a logical or historical progression of aesthetic avant-gardism. Never has there existed in China a sphere of aesthetic autonomy as described by Peter Bürger and other Western theorists of the avant-garde. The European and North American conceptual art of the late 1960s and early 1970s was, in this respect, a new movement that furthered the modernist project by questioning the role of art as an instrument of representation while challenging the institutional apparatus, ultimately leading to what some postmodern theorists would call the dematerialization of art in the 1980s. What was essential to the Euro-North American experience, and perfectly epitomized by the stance of Marcel Duchamp, was the critical examination of art institutions and the complicated quest for autonomy inherent in the Western avant-garde tradition.[3] As the father of Western conceptual art, "Duchamp did not hail 'Anti-Art' like the Berlin Dadaists, but rather a subtly complex form of 'Non-art.'"[4] Nonetheless, the conceptual art that emerged in the later 1960s in North America and Britain seemed to continue the search for aesthetic autonomy in a failed avant-garde tradition. Non-art still respects the line of art history; anti-art (in the sense of inclusion and synthesis, rather than exclusion and split), however, to which I rather refer the Chinese avant-garde, attempts to modify the relationship between art and the total social and cultural system in which it exists.

In positioning itself as an anti-art project, the '85 Movement, and especially idea art, adopted the same foundation as Mao's Red Guard art during the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, the revolution in ideas also continued the total modernity project from the early twentieth century's revolution in art, as discussed in chapter 1. The difference between Mao's anti-art and the earlier intended revolution in art was that the former was populist, whereas the latter was still based on an intellectual, or elite, model.

The anti-art methodology of Chinese idea art, therefore, was not a logical, conceptual development of art from within, but a response to the external forces of both the social and the artistic environment. In the 1980s, Chinese idea art played a role similar to that of Dada; that is to say, it was a vehicle for challenging social and aesthetic conventions. The anti-art project of the 1980s was initiated by Huang Yongping in conjunction with the Xiamen Dada group, and further developed by Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan, and Xu Bing, among others. This group of artists of the 1980s also embraced traditional philosophy, in particular Chan Buddhism, which encourages an ironic sensibility and a refusal to privilege any one doctrine over another in the search for truth. The third arsenal of influences for Chinese idea art's attack on the status quo was Mao's revolutionary art, especially its nihilistic and destructive philosophy, which one may be able to find in aspects of the work of Huang Yongping, Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and a number of others. In the approach they pioneered, the Chinese language and its characters became the major sources of Chinese idea art.

Unlike the idea artists of the 1980s, who committed themselves to a philosophical elaboration of Chan principles in art, the artists of the 1990s had little interest in philosophical and linguistic elaborations of an anti-art project. Instead, they freely selected and transformed quotidian objects in their surroundings. They continued the anti-art tradition of the 1980s, making some unmarketable (and impossible-to-display) works of art in their apartments, or on the streets, in response to both the harsh political environment and ever more widespread consumerism. The anti-art sentiment of the early 1990s was even more extreme than that of earlier times, marked as it was by the dramatic dematerialization and deinstitutionalization of the projects. The artists began to share, however, some common interests and targets with their Western counterparts, due to the rising prominence of the transnational art market forces of the 1990s.

This anti-art project could also be seen as a critique of Chinese idea art that both comments on and encourages a closer investigation of the moral

condition of the avant-garde itself. In the 1980s, the idea artists were critical of the romanticism and utopianism of their avant-garde colleagues, like those involved in the new Chinese humanism (*renwen*), such as the rationalist and current of life painters.

The difference between *renwen* and *guannian* was that while the *renwen* artists advocated ideas when making artworks, the idea in their specific humanist practice was materialized. From a methodological perspective, "ideas" for the *renwen* artists were more or less equivalent to themes; although *renwen* artists proclaimed that their art went beyond art, their art fundamentally existed as a reflection of thought. In other words, *renwen* artworks contained materialized ideas based in moral or philosophical tendencies.

The *guannian* artists of the '85 Movement, on the other hand, were concerned with the function of art, and sought to answer defining questions such as: What is art? What is contemporary art in the changing context from modernism to postmodernism? What is the relationship between social life and art-making? What is the relationship between the writing of art history, artworks, and the social system? In other words, the Chinese idea art project during the 1980s (as well as 1990s) was about social power and discourses related to art.

The *renwen* painters strove to replace Mao's previous representational art, including its byproducts (e.g., scar and rustic painting). This replacement and criticism did not engage the methodological aspects of art but rather its moral aspects. The *guannian* artists, however, wanted to completely undermine any kind of representation, including that of the previous *renwen* art.

Therefore, the Chinese idea artists of the 1980s positioned themselves as investigators of the corruption of their avant-garde colleagues; and yet again, as the social critics of Chinese modernity. The apartment artists of the early 1990s, and the artists of Chinese maximalism which peaked in the mid-1990s, engaged in a project of a different kind of dematerialization, which can be defined as materialization involved in daily experience, using inexpensive materials, proposals on paper, and repetitious, time-consuming labor to make their small-scale installations in various private spaces. Artworks of this kind served to distance the artists from material desires and the social corruption that affected the avant-garde circles of the 1990s.

The revolution in ideas exemplified by Chinese *guannian* art had several demonstrative features. One was the blurring of boundaries between social life and art within a Chinese context. Recall that intellectual life was one of the most important driving forces of Chinese social reform during the 1980s, as discussed in chapter 3. Both Chan tradition and Mao's legacy existed as referential models for this revolution in ideas. The exploration of the division between art and life is one of the most important legacies of Western conceptual art since Duchamp. Chinese avant-garde artists of this period disdained only presenting the notion, and consequent materialization, of the idea into artwork. Instead, they attempted to turn ideas or concepts into holistic entities through their enthusiastic activism. In many ways, they succeeded and were able to make art a social event of daily life.

The second important feature of Chinese *guannian* art was the search for contextualization, which resulted in a rejection of arbitrary readings of the work of art while critically assessing the power of authorship embedded in the cult of the artist. Within this context, Chinese conceptual art approached anti-conceptual art through an examination of the individual's experience, involving a kind of meditation. Ultimately, it was not the *concept* of art but the *process* of making the art that defined this conceptual turn. One may follow this line of development from Xu Bing's word works, such as *A Book from the Sky* and *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, to the forms that we call maximalism.

Finally, it is very important to note that the Chinese idea art project represented a paradoxical negotiation between a perceptual aesthetic and its complete destruction. Again, unlike most of their Western counterparts, Chinese avant-garde artists never attempted to relinquish or diminish the power of the visual. On the contrary, the Chinese deployed visual power to enhance the conceptual meaning of their works. The best example of this sort is Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* of 1986–1987 (see chapter 7 for a full discussion). This attempt at balance between the visual and the conceptual was characteristic of all the *guannian* artworks, and it had its roots in traditional Chinese aesthetic theory, which discouraged extremes

of any type in art practice. This negotiation had two functions. One was to go beyond the traditional idea of art representation and reach the realm of a totalizing cultural sphere. Second, the negotiation between the visual and the conceptual is the foundation of Chinese language, which played an important role in shaping ideological orthodoxy throughout Chinese history. Needless to say, traditional calligraphy and script became one of the major weapons for the *guannian*. By employing the Chinese language, the *guannian* project involved both a reconstruction and a simultaneous deconstruction of Chinese heritage, as it established a critical contemporary transformative methodology and denuded calligraphy of its didactic institutional function.

In this chapter, I will discuss the *guannian* projects from 1985 to 1989 that established a foundation for the next generation to follow. In the following chapters, I will move to the *guannian* projects in alternative spaces, including the apartment art (*gongyu yishu*) and maximalism (*jiduo zhuyi*) of the 1990s.

The *guannian* project of the 1980s consisted of three different aspects: (1) a Chan-Dada-oriented direction, which was mainly practiced by the Xiamen Dada group led by Huang Yongping; (2) the practice of language art, adopted by Wu Shanzhuan, Xu Bing, and Gu Wenda; and (3) the activities that attempted to cross the boundary between art and daily life. The last approach was spread mostly in the 1990s, in maximalism and apartment art. Many artists and groups of the 1980s were involved with various visual languages. For instance, consider the tactile art (*chujue yishu*, discussed in chapter 7) created by Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping, and Gu Dexin in Beijing; some art projects generated by the Pool Society in Hangzhou and the M Group in Shanghai; and some pop art and performance art by the groups from Fujian, Shanxi, Guangzhou, Hubei, and Hunan provinces. No matter how different the projects were, the main purpose of *guannian* art from this period was to make a revolutionary break from the old concepts of art. They sought not only to go beyond the long-dominant forms of socialist realism, but also to break with all the new trends in art that had emerged after the Cultural Revolution, including the humanism (*renwen*) of the '85 Movement.

For example, in 1986 Huang Yongping published an article entitled "Xiamen Dada—A Kind of Postmodernism," in which he directly challenged the "lofty spirituality" and "rationalism" of the Northern Art Group.[5] Artists such as Xu Bing and Wu Shanzhuan carried out the greatest subversive attacks on utopian tendencies. The revolution of ideas in the '85 Movement evolved into an anti-art project that emerged from the philosophical level. Here, anti-art meant rebelling against old art, the hypocrisy of art, and totalitarian and institutional art.

Anti-Art

Huang Yongping can be considered the pioneer of Chinese idea art, when viewed in terms of almost every characteristic of Chinese *guannian* art discussed above.[6] Born in 1954, Huang Yongping graduated from the Department of Oil Painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou in 1982. He then worked for seven years as a secondary school teacher, after which he left China for France.

The key tenets of Huang's philosophy are: (1) art is not significant in and of itself, at least insofar as it expresses a person's individuality; (2) it is only when something can bring about change in specific contexts that this thing can be called art; (3) moreover, one must completely demolish the notion of art and destroy any doctrine or system that has prescribed goals for art. Huang's anti-art project sought to demolish not only the material form, function, and system of art, but also the game of art itself. It is important to note that although his anti-art project was influenced by Dadaism, its theoretical basis was in traditional philosophy, in particular the theory of nothingness or *wu*.

Although Huang rarely commented on contemporary Chinese art before he left for Paris, almost every step of his strategy was targeted at a fashionable contemporary trend in art. In 1983, he devoted himself to a project with the eventual goal of eliminating self-expression from the art-making process. Huang was working in opposition to aestheticism, which was fashionable among academic painters in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s who valued self-expression and individual style.[7] Like Duchamp, Huang asserted that industrial mass

production was far more truthful and powerful than any subjective art with a unique, individual style. He created a series of paintings using a spray gun and lacquer rather than a brush and oil paint, and titled the works *Paint [Spray] Gun Series*. All of his "paintings" were similarly associated with the industrial equipment that he used to create them, such as *Pipe with T Shape* (*Dingzixing guandao*). The unsentimental titles and images tend, as Huang said, to "demolish any trace of a human's individual style with unique strokes."[8]

Also in 1983, Huang Yongping and fellow artists organized an exhibition called the "Five-Man Exhibition" ("Wuren huazhan") in which they displayed various readymade works. As they demonstrated, "the show attempts to question the illusion of representation in art and its associated criteria, and the experimental works of the show are presented as a bridge to link daily life and art together."[9]

When the '85 Movement emerged, Huang decided that rather than express social meanings in artworks as the humanists did, he wanted to challenge the idea of originality in the work of art. Considering the work of art to be meaningless and believing that artists should not subjectively incorporate meaning into their work, he sought a completely random approach, one based on the concept of nothingness (*wu*).

At this time, he made a series of works titled *Nonexpressive Painting: Roulette Wheel Series* (*Feibiaoda de huihua: Zhuanpan xilie*) in which the "paintings" (he refuses to see them as paintings) were made according to the instructions of a spinning wheel, incorporating chance, or castings from the *Yi jing* or Book of Changes, an ancient Daoist volume.

Figure 6.1

Huang Yongping, *Nonexpressive Painting: Roulette Wheel Series*, 1985.

According to Huang, the goal was "to extend art creation into a simplified nonformalist, nonbaroque, nonsymbolic, nonexpressive, nonskillful, and nonunique condition."[10]

The final form of the "painting" was, for Huang, not important; what was important for him was how the result was generated. In the *Roulette Wheel Series*, Huang made objects according to a strict set of procedures he determined for himself, which led to a very impersonal work of art. The procedures included several steps:

1. Create a turntable demarcated into eight sections, with marks of eight divinations from the *Yi jing*.
2. Mark on the canvas eight identical sections.
3. Assign a certain code to each color. For example, green (ink) was Number 4, red (oil) was Number 12, blue (acrylic) was Number 20, and paint thinner was Number 11. The assignment of codes to these colors was purely random. There were a total of twenty-five codes.
4. Create dice with codes that corresponded to the colors. For example, color Number 1 corresponded to Number 1 on the dice. Each die would be used only once in sixty-four throws.
5. Spin the turntable sixty-four times to determine the position of colors on the canvas, with the random stopping of the turntable determining the matching selection.
6. Fill out a form with the two codes (position and color) and place the colors on the canvas in the positions marked on the form. Then the painting is completed.

After Huang Yongping finished four canvases of this sort of "painting," he gave up. He thought the process was too boring. On the other hand, he avoided creating any kind of "authentic" method, as many of his friends suggested he might do after hundreds of pieces were done. His main goal was to criticize and distrust any aesthetic connotations. He wanted to leave this incomplete project behind. He also strongly asserted that using the roulette wheel in this artwork was different from gambling, because he did not intend or desire any result, whereas the gambler does. Thus Huang made a machine (the roulette wheel) into a person (an artist), at the same time as making a person (himself) into a machine.[11] Ironically, viewers always seem to seek the expression of a certain aesthetic taste, like that of a Pollock-like abstract expressionism, in these "paintings" of Huang's. Paradoxically, his substantial verbal descriptions and the irrational action behind his project did not overcome the effective surface of the "paintings," i.e., their style and forms.

Huang further developed this idea of randomness from the *Roulette Wheel Series* in a work he created for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in 1989. This time, however, he left the mechanics to the audience, after creating certain roles and questions. The work included six small turntables, each made of wood and with a plastic carrying case, inside of which there was a photocopied set of instructions indicating how to use the turntable to create artwork. The instructions were as follows:

1. To move or not to move = to create or not to create (two choices)
2. Where to begin? (Determine the location [on the painting]): 1–360 degrees
3. When to begin? 1–24 hours
4. What material to select? 1–64 [choices]
5. How to create? (Random numbers [on the wheel])
6. To compare [the painting] with which [masterpiece]? Select from Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Today: From Abstract Expressionism to Surrealism* (Oxford: Phaidon). Total illustrations: 392

At the same time, Huang also created a big turntable on which he marked 384 (a number also from the *Yi jing*) different choices and possibilities for art-making, which he randomly selected from dictionaries, texts on art history, books on the history of ideas, and so on.

This repetitious and time-consuming process of art-making and demolishing of the artist's arbitrary subjectivity, initiated by Huang and the idea art of the '85 Movement, spread in the 1990s in the form of maximalism.

In 1986, Huang Yongping produced a number of works and writings engaging another anti-art project, which was manifested in his provocative essay "Xiamen Dada—A Kind of Postmodernism?" ("Xiamen Dada—yizhong houxiandai?").[12] His philosophy, combining Dada and Chan Buddhism,

Figure 6.2

Huang Yongping, *Roulette with Six Plates*, 1989.

was summarized in the essay, in which he asserted that, "in their degree of spirituality, Chan Buddhism is Dada, and Dada is Chan."

The iconoclastic theories of the seventh-century Chan master known as the sixth patriarch, Hui Neng (638–713), inspired many artists from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, such as Wu Shanzhuan, Gu Wenda, Song Haidong, and Huang Yongping, partially due to the great fascination with and study of Chan Buddhism in the academy in the early and mid-1980s. Following this Chan theory, Huang Yongping rebelled, using the concept of destruction; for Huang, there was a nexus of distinction and affinity between Chan Buddhism and postmodernism due to their insight, simplicity, and extremely skeptical attitudes.

Embracing these extreme attitudes eventually culminated in several events, including the "Xiamen Dada Modern Art Exhibition." After the exhibition, Huang Yongping had his fellow artists burn all the works they had shown. A similar event, called *Artworks Become Trash, 8:30 p.m.–10:00 p.m., November 9, 1987* (*Zuopin laji chuli, 8:30 p.m.–10 p.m. 11/9/1987*), took place at a garbage dumpster in Xiamen. Huang Yongping and his cohorts threw more than ten of their paintings into the garbage dumpster and let the garbage truck take them away at the regularly scheduled time.

On December 1, 1987, Huang created one of his most cynical conceptual works by placing two books in a washing machine. The books were *A History of Chinese Painting* by Wang Bomin, recognized as one of the most authoritative texts on Chinese art history, and *A Concise History of Modern Painting* by Herbert Read. Read's was the first book of its kind to be translated into Chinese, and it was the most influential English text on modern Western art in the China of the mid-1980s.[13] Huang offered a cynical interpretation of this work: "In China, regarding the two cultures of East and West, traditional and modern, it is constantly being discussed which is right, which is wrong, and how to blend the two. In my opinion, placing these two texts in the washing machine for two minutes symbolizes this situation well and solves the problem much more effectively and appropriately than those debates lasting a hundred years."[14] This work, which eventually consisted of a pile of paper pulp, was first displayed in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in Beijing in 1989.

Figure 6.3

Huang Yongping and Xiamen Dada burning all their works after an exhibition, 1986.

Figure 6.4

Huang Yongping, *Artworks Become Trash, 8:30 p.m.–10:00 p.m., November 9, 1987*, 1987.

Figure 6.5

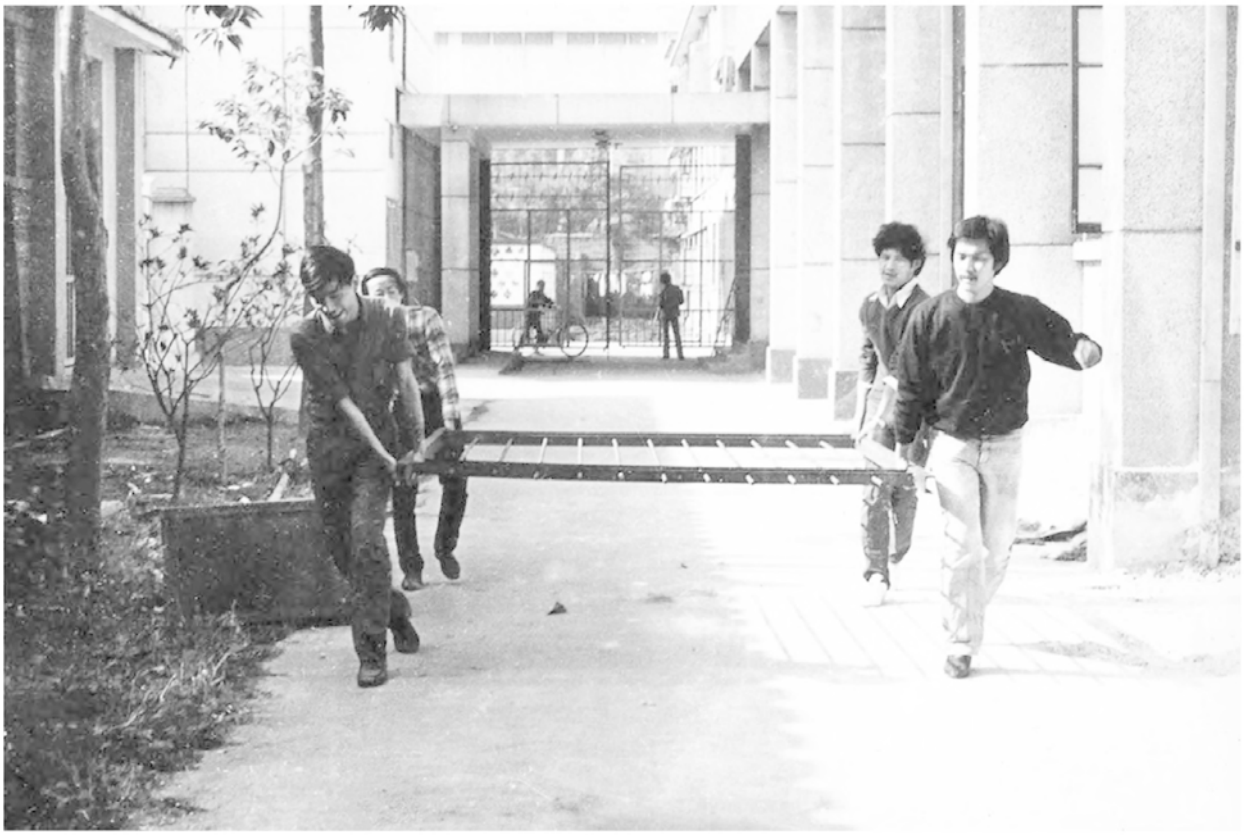
Huang Yongping, *History of Chinese Art and a Concise History of Modern Painting in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes*, 1987.

The Significance of Nothingness

For the artists of the '85 Movement, life was a universal and abstract concept, which was more highly valued than a specific and personal experience of daily life. They emphasized cultural and philosophical concepts in an effort to impact the viewer's understanding of the environment, whether natural, urban, or social. Many art groups of the '85 Movement took their "cultural activities" (*wenhua huodong*) into the public sphere. For instance, Song Yongping and his fellow artists twice took their "countryside cultural activities" into Shanxi province, in 1986 and 1987. A similar activity, which they called sunbathing (*shaitaiyang*), also took place in Najing Xuanwu Park in 1986. The concept of life in Huang Yongping's idea art practice, however, was more philosophically influenced by the tradition of nothingness (*wu*), which has also been translated as "inaction." In Huang's practice, this *wu* can be understood as "do nothing in art making." Huang combined Dada with Chinese aesthetics by employing traditional Chan and Daoist philosophy in the creation of his works.

Xiamen Dada organized an exhibition titled "An Event Taking Place in the Art Gallery of Fujian Province" ("Fasheng zai Fujian meishuguan nei de shijian zhanlan"), which took place on December 16, 1986. The artists did not install works of art in the gallery. Instead, they gathered materials such as big iron grates, wooden panels, a handcart, concrete, fans, damaged sofas, and couches or chairs from the yard of the Art Gallery of Fujian Province in Fuzhou city. Then they moved them into the gallery space. One hour after the exhibition opened, the artists were given notice that the exhibition had to be shut down immediately for "a certain unknown reason." The result did not disappoint Huang Yongping. He was actually pleased with the closure, because the act resulted in nothingness. Just as the artists brought nothing with them, they also left with nothing. For the Xiamen Dadaists, the exhibition only proved that it was the museum system that determined the fate of the artwork.[15] The event dealt with the meaninglessness of the art object and the art-making process.

Here, Huang shifted his attention from investigating the meaning of the art object to questioning the whole art system and art institutions.



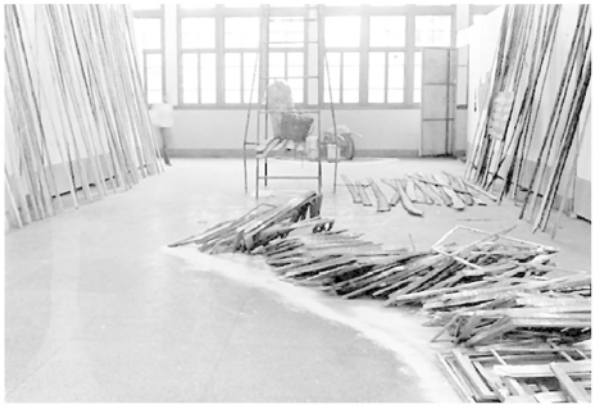


Figure 6.6

Lin Jiahua, Ren Yueming, Huang Yongming, and Yu Xiaogang setting up "An Event Taking Place in the Art Gallery of Fujian Province," 1986.

Figure 6.7

"An Event Taking Place in the Art Gallery of Fujian Province," 1986.

This became the next project in his career, which was marked by a futile exploration determined to negate art history and art institutions. An example of this was his *Pulling the National Art Museum of China Away*, which was a proposal for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition. Huang's goal was to involve the National Art Museum of China in his work, and to take the symbol of the nation's official art, namely the building of the National Art Museum of China, as the object of his attack.[16] The plan was very provocative, and the proposed symbolic action of pulling the National Art Museum of China away was an extremely political statement. Unsurprisingly, the proposal was rejected by the museum. The artist's substitute work in the exhibition was a long rope suspended from the third floor to the first floor, running along galleries to stairs. Not one visitor paid attention to the rope, though occasionally it tangled and twined around their feet. This revealed Huang's idea of randomness again, as well as his interest in creating a chance relationship with people's lives.

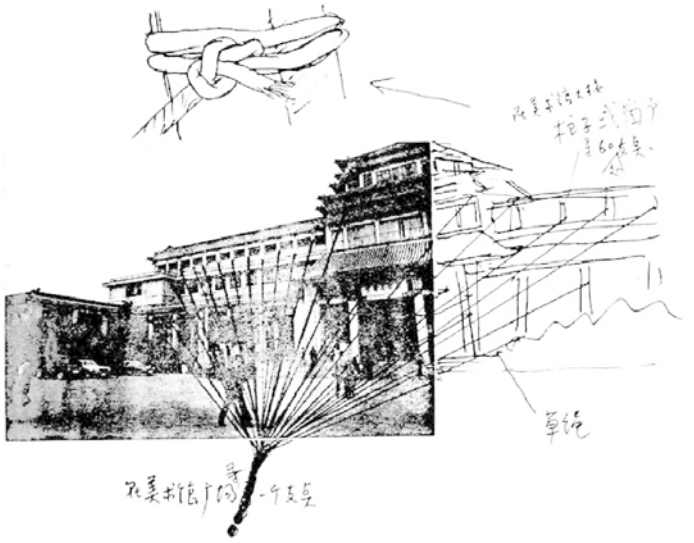


Figure 6.8

Chen Chengzong, Jiao Yueming, Lin Jiahua, Linchun, Huang Yongpan, Wu Yiming, and Huang Yongping, *Proposal for Pulling the National Art Museum of China Away,* 1989.

Figure 6.9

Huang Yongping's rope project in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition.

In 1987, Huang Yongping and his colleagues undertook many important projects in Xiamen, most of which were discussed in Huang's "Thinking, Making, and Projects in 1987" ("Baqinian de sikao, zhizuo de huodong").[17] After the abrupt closure in 1986 of the exhibition "An Event Taking Place in the Art Gallery of Fujian Province," it became extremely difficult for Huang and the Xiamen Dada group to find museum or gallery space. In early 1987, Xiamen Dada began a new project investigating the possibility of making art in alternative spaces, addressing the public at large rather than accommodating the museum's audience. They planned to have their version of process art take place in various public spaces: a garbage dump, a slaughterhouse, a public toilet (the only place without a street number in Chinese cities), a hospital, a road, a bus station, a shopping mall, or a ruined building, all places that were "anywhere and nowhere."[18] Furthermore, the artists themselves used only their concepts and the public space for the creation of their art. This process, called *wuzhong shengyou*, involved no art materials, art institutions, or art audiences. The method of *wuzhong shengyou* was this:

1. If you do not remove any objects from a place, the objects themselves automatically become artwork.
2. Remove some of the objects from a place, and the remaining objects become artwork.
3. The objects and the people exposed at a site together become artwork.

Huang's *Environmental Works*, dating from April 1987, were also associated with the idea of *wuzhong shengyou*. Huang began several works in his quest to find a greater creative power, delving into areas such as time, air (including pollution), or the unknowing involvement of the public, in order to completely demolish any artistic intention or motivation. But therein rests the impossibility of success, due to the well-established intentional fallacy of both interpreting these works and executing them.

On April 20, 1987, Huang made a wooden box that contained a long scroll of blank paper, 110 by 100 centimeters in size, which he pulled partly out of the box and then connected to an easel. He made a mark and wrote the date on the paper every time he pulled out more paper from the box. He repeated

Figure 6.10

Huang Yongping, *No Move Needed, the Objects Themselves Automatically Become Artworks*, 1987.

Figure 6.11

Huang Yongping, *Need to Move, Add, or Remove Objects to Make Artworks*, 1987.

Figure 6.12

Huang Yongping, *Rearrange the Objects to Make Artworks*, 1987.

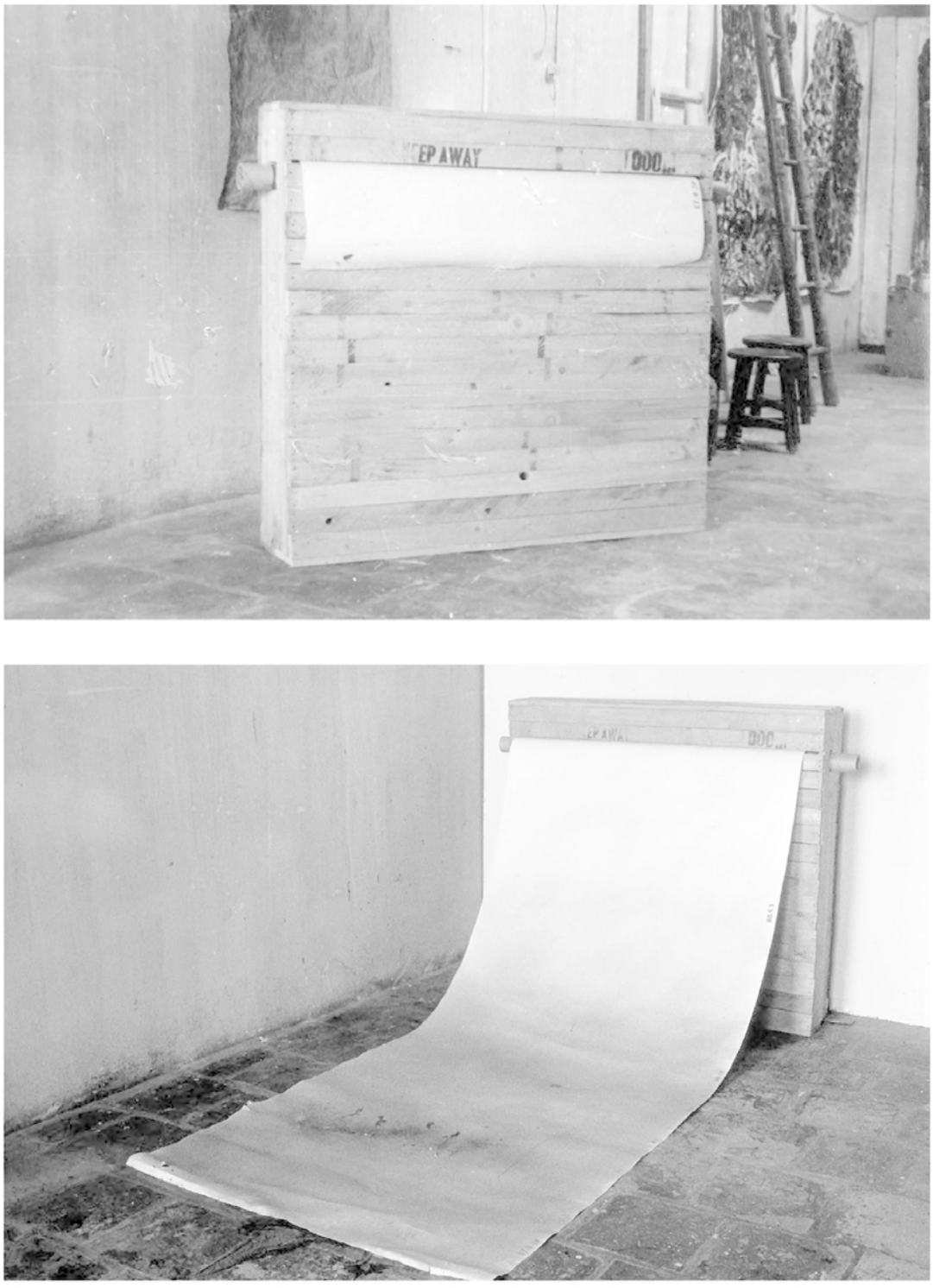


Figure 6.13

Huang Yongping, *Dust*, 1987.

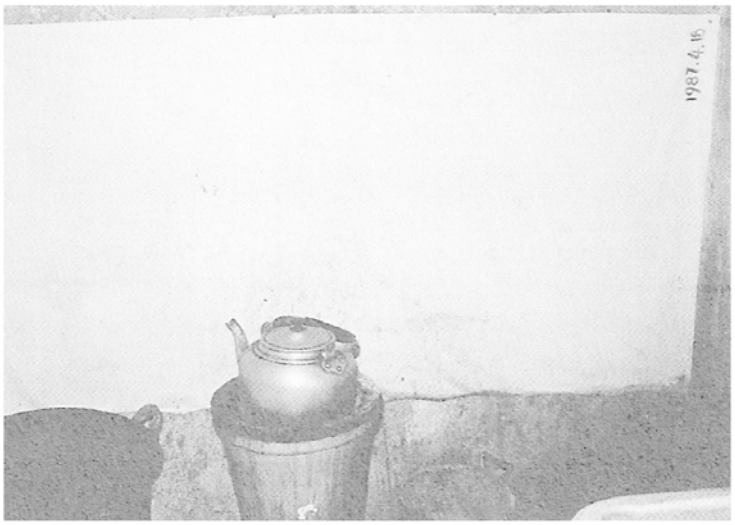


Figure 6.14

Huang Yongping, *The Kitchen, April 18–December 18, 1987.*

Figure 6.15

Huang Yongping, *Sharpening Pencils, December 16, 1987–January 25, 1988.*

the process for a period of two years.[19] Sunlight and pollution caused the paper to become dirty, and it yellowed because of its acidic base. Huang titled the completed work *Dust*. Huang also made a work titled *The Kitchen*. Between April 18, 1987, and December 8, 1987, he hung a canvas above the stove in his kitchen, where it was exposed to cooking smoke, dirt, and dust. In addition, from December 16, 1987, to January 25, 1988, he left a 122-by-240-centimeter piece of canvas on the floor in a classroom of the high school where he was an art teacher. During their drawing class, the students would drop pencil shavings and other debris on the canvas to "create" a painting.

Art Merging with Life

Apart from Xiamen Dada, the most radical art of the time was that which promoted the idea of activism. The art taking place early in the movement, in the middle of the 1980s, especially attempted to break free from old ideas of art by incorporating certain philosophical and artistic approaches. For artists so engaged, performance was the best means to promote a true connection between people, life, and art.

A prime example was the performance by the Southern Artists Salon in 1986. When the '85 Movement began, some young artists who lived in Guangzhou in the southern province of Guangdong, such as Wang Du and Lin Yilin, became concerned with the perception that Guangzhou was a "cultural desert."[20] To change this misconception, they founded the Southern Artists Salon (*Nanfang yishujia shalong*) on May 14, 1986. They were a mixed group of artists from different fields, such as fine art, architecture, philosophy, literature, music, dance, and film. The major ideas of the group were articulated by Wang Du in his speech at the founding ceremony. Wang criticized both Chinese tradition and Western modernism. He proclaimed that the boundaries between the new and old, and the East and the West, should be eliminated through a new attitude of cultural pluralism and diversity. The concept of the Southern Artists Salon, as Wang indicated, was contemporaneity or *dangdai zhuyi*, a phrase whose meaning is close to postmodernism.[21] In order to express this concept, the artists planned

to create a sort of "environmental art" (*huanjing yishu*) to destroy the boundaries of different art forms and eliminate obstacles between artists, artworks, and their audiences. They contributed their blood in blood drives, attracting financial support. These actions enlisted many supporters and enabled them to eventually make their exhibition plans a reality.

On September 3, 1986, the Southern Artists Salon held a performance event called the *First Experimental Exhibition* in a stadium at Guangzhou Zhongshan University, also known as Sun Yat-Sen University. It took place twice. The artists stated, "At first glance, when the audience entered the exhibition hall, they felt that they were being surrounded by a peculiar environment in which human beings were being purified by a sublime spirit."[22] The exhibition space was covered by two colors—black and white. On one side were some balls formed in strange shapes protruding from a black wall, and on the other there were some panels. Some were painted with human upper parts and others with human lower parts, to attract the audience to stand behind "incomplete human bodies." At the center of the stadium, there were ten movable boxes on which, or surrounding which, were ten female figures resembling moving plaster statues. Some were lying down, some knelt on the ground or followed music; all were illuminated by light projections. "The people involved in the performance, and the audience outside the stage, were encouraged to experience a spiritual encounter at a specific moment, going beyond previous artistic fantasies characterized by bland imagination and illusion."[23]

In the middle of the 1980s, when some anti-art activities, such as the practice of Xiamen Dada, attacked the institutional framework of art production, some anti-artists rejected the institutional framework altogether. Song Yongping and other artists of the Three Step Studio had a cultural activity project in July of 1986 that they called *The Country Project* (*Xiangcun jihua*). They took their sculptures and paintings to remote villages in an attempt to communicate with illiterate peasants while living and eating together with them. Resisting the elitism of professional bourgeois artists tied to academic institutions, Song and his comrades acted out the drama of the "reeducated students" of Mao's Cultural Revolution, when elite cultural producers were forced to learn to work for the people as they were educated in popular culture by the people. Their motto, "Serve the People," endorsed by Mao, demonstrated the paradox of populism in contemporary Chinese society. Since an art that served the people was not a reality even in Mao's period, *The Country Project* represented an attempt at a purified process of art production, this time with neither propagandist nor commercial aims. From another perspective, these kinds of social actions popularized in the '85 Movement reflected the antagonism some artists felt in response to the booming urban commercial culture. Thus, the artists involved referred to their works as "village cultural projects" (*xiangcun wenhua huodong*).

The activism of the M Art Group (*M yishu qunti*) was another project of anti-artists condemning elitism. The M Art Group was founded in October 1986 by Song Haidong, who was born in Shanghai in 1958 and trained in the Sculpture Department of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, starting in 1985. He went on to teach at the Shanghai Art College with other Shanghai artists. The "M" of M Art Group is the first letter of "man," "montage," and "morphist." Here, "man" refers to the artists' male gender, since all the artists from the group were men, while "montage" symbolized the artists' incorporation of different elements, and "morphist" was a metaphor for their changing sensibility in art.[24]

In their manifesto, they proclaimed that the M Group recognized the fact that many people still admired what the M Group considered bogus artists protected by old value systems and their associated crude, hollow works. Therefore, they advocated that artists walk out of their studios, plunge into real life, and impart the truth to the people at large. The manifesto also criticized the extreme views held by modernists, who demonstrated a totally different form of individuality that caused alienation and disorder and fostered a wild rhythm of life inherent to industrialized societies. The M Group's attitude of nothingness, which runs counter to industrialized and capitalist human culture, was intended to disrupt people's normal breathing patterns and heartbeat, depriving them of their confidence in material existence. The M Group held fast to the tenet that

Figure 6.16

The scene of *First Experimental Exhibition* by the Southern Artists Salon, 1986.

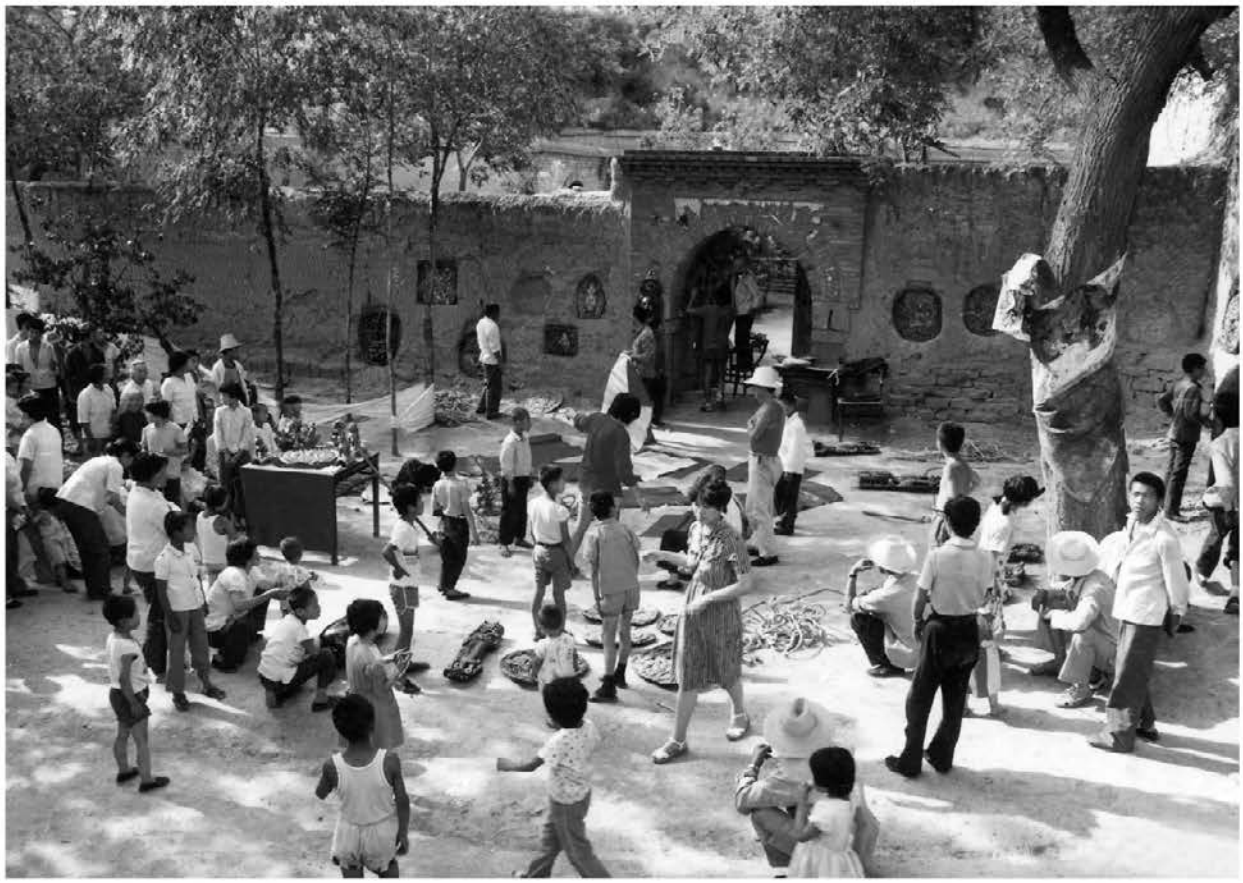


Figure 6.17

Song Yongping, Wang Jiping, and others, *The Country Project,* 1986.

artists should respect man and life, for life itself is art. They believed that artists should regard themselves first of all as common people in society. In their creative process, the M Group attempted to break with the man-made, traditional definitions of time and space designated by such terms as "modern," "Oriental," "Western," "music," "drama," "film," and "painting." These categories reinforced barriers. The works of the M Group would borrow actions and events from common, daily life.[25]

On December 21, 1986, a series of visual lectures by the M Art Group took place in the Theater of the Shanghai Workers' Cultural Palace (*Shanghai gongren wenhuagong*). Sixteen members of the group successively got on the stage, enacting a silent performance, and an audience of about two hundred people, including young poets, university students, and journalists, was invited to join in for the duration of one and a half hours. There was no logical sequence between the individual sections. All sections emphasized the connection between life and art, as they aimed to break down, by various means, separations derived from old art ideas and forms.

There was, however, a lot of suffering and violence in the performance. For example, in *Ceremony* (*Yishi*), a naked artist, Tang Guangming, was forced into a wooden restraint by two followers, then beaten with willow branches while clamped with instruments of torture until he collapsed onto the stage. In *Violence* (*Baoligan*), Zhou Tiehai stood naked while two other artists punished him by pricking his back with needles.

Such works were all violent, masochistic, and sadistic in one way or another. Any sort of wrapping, binding, hanging, or beating that one can imagine took place. Although the action militantly expressed the artists' rebellion against the restraints of conventional art ideas, this sort of wild, violent behavior, usually enacted upon the artists' own bodies, revealed, intentionally or not, the sorrows

Figure 6.18

Members of the M Art Group with their manifesto, 1986.

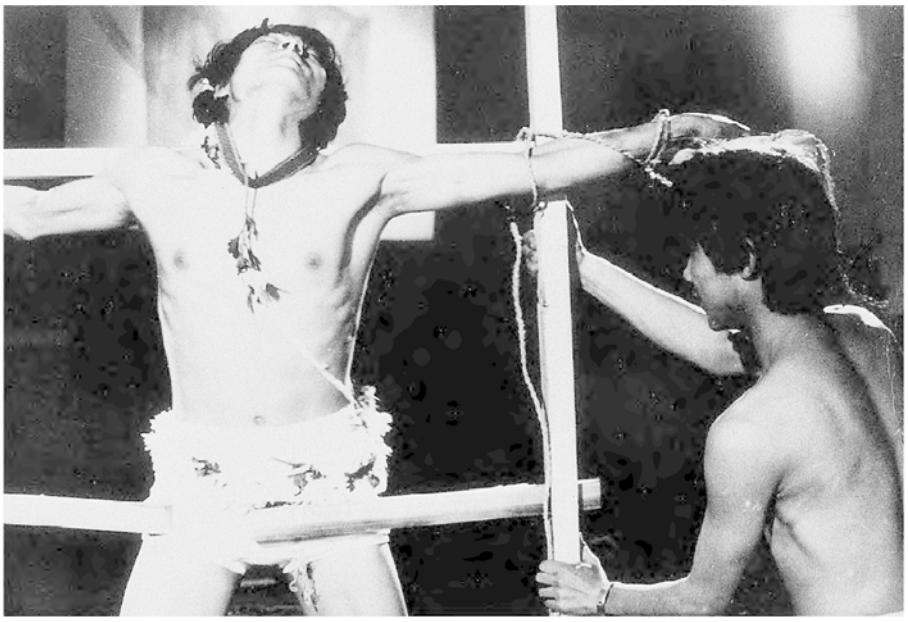


Figure 6.19

Tang Guangming, *Ceremony*, 1986.

Figure 6.20

Zhou Tiehai and Yang Xu, *Violence*, 1986.

and disturbances hidden in the artists' souls as they found themselves straddling cultural epochs and influences while trying to forge a new way.

The revolution in ideas of the '85 Movement was an important part of the overall project of the cultural avant-garde. This revolution intended two things. One was to take the most destructive and radical avant-garde concept from Dadaism as a model to destroy the conventional notion of art in the Chinese context, in order to merge with the international contemporary art world. The other affected the cultural avant-garde. Artists such as Huang Yongping, also devoted to traditional philosophy, saw the revolution in ideas as a model that could go beyond art per se into a broader world context. Huang's practice in the 1980s was one of the most philosophical approaches of the ideological revolution. Among those who experienced a similar destructive/constructive mentality, he was the most interested in how to break down the boundary between life and art. In the next chapter, I will discuss some art projects that are more focused on either linguistic reconstruction or ambiguous imagery play.

7

Metaphor over Meaning

Language Art and Gray Humor

Language, including both its writing and meaning, was investigated by a number of artists in the '85 Movement, most notably Wu Shanzhuan, Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and the New Mark Group (*Xin kedu*). They are also part of "idea art" (*guannian yishu*). Rather than making a revolution in ideas to challenge the old ideas of what constitutes art, as Huang Yongping and others did, the artists discussed in this chapter directly used "ideas"—Chinese characters, which in Chinese linguistic tradition combined both conceptual and pictorial elements—to make their own idea artworks, which did not attempt to give a clear concept or meaning to the audience (nor to themselves, I believe), but rather to create a visual space in which looking, reading, and reinterpretation might be involved as an unseparated metaphorical complex, which could go beyond linguistic meaning or meaninglessness.

Xu Bing began his magnum opus *A Book from the Sky* in 1987, while he was a teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing. Wu Shanzhuan was another artist who used Chinese characters as his basic material, but he paid more attention to randomly collecting the language of mass culture. Wu appropriated Mao's linguistic culture, which was developed for proselytizing during the Cultural Revolution, as well as that of contemporary consumer culture, in order to create a kind of new hybrid, thereby generating both nonsensical and plurisensical language. By juxtaposing these contradictory fragments of language in his art—fragments that are omnipresent in Chinese mass culture—he sought to eliminate the illusion of authorship and expose irreconcilable tendencies in the intended function of the language of mass culture.

Xu Bing took another approach, never providing any complete text, meaningful sentence, or even legible character for his audience. His *Book from the Sky* is an ocean of meaningless and fictitious "characters" that he painstakingly invented. The significant meaning of the work was in its traditional literati form. The fact that the characters were incapable of conveying any meaning whatsoever was cleverly hidden, confounding the viewer's expectations derived from the literati form's hallowed tradition of conveying meaning. Xu manipulates to an extreme this version of an elite myth so as to utterly undermine the myth itself. The approaches and methodologies of both Wu and Xu were apparently inspired by traditional language and philosophy. Their works made sense by means of the transformation of tradition into the contemporary context according to the artists' interests.

From the perspective of Chinese etymology, the works of Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and Wu Shanzhuan completely transformed the traditional metonymic functions, or indicatives (*zhishi*), that were highly coded attributes of Chinese characters as laid out in the traditional "six functions" theory (*liu shu*) of Chinese writing. These artists' strategies changed the characters into purely pictographic (*xiangxing*) elements.[1]

Wu Shanzhuan's *Red Humor* Series: The Recontextualization of Political and Consumerist Mass Language

Born in 1960 and trained in the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, Wu Shanzhuan began his Cultural Revolution-inspired pop art practice in 1986, at the same time as the emergence of the '85 Movement.