

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.



Figure 7.1

Wu Shanzhuan, *Red, Black, White—Cash*, 1986.

Figure 7.2

Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor Series: Red Seals*, 1987.



His *Red Humor* series, begun in 1986, might be seen as a precursor of the political pop that flourished in the early 1990s.

A pronounced pop art affinity has always been strong in Wu's art, beginning with his *Red Humor* installations in Zhejiang in 1986 and 1987. The *Red Humor* series consisted of four parts: *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* (*Chizi: dazibao*), *Red Seals* (*Hongyin*), *Windy Red Flags* (*Hongqi piaopiao*), and *Big Business* (*Dashengyi*).

Wu Shanzhuan often used readymade objects in his work, or simulated the appearance of objects from daily life. Wu prefaced his *Red Humor* group with his 1986 work *70% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White*, a collaborative project installed in an old temple. The exhibition combined neatly printed phrases and slogans from advertisements, newspapers, classical poetry, Chinese religion, politics, and the discourse of daily life in startling ways. One painting took the form of a sign saying "Cabbage, three cents a catty." Another had the words "Garbage, garbage, garbage" written in such a way as to resemble a pile, on top of which perched the word "Nirvana." The ratio of colors specified in the title, however, immediately evoked the tensions of Chinese political confrontations, particularly those of the Cultural Revolution, with red representing good Communists, black representing enemies of the people, and white representing the nonaligned.

Red Characters: Big-Character Posters, a major work installed the following year in the artist's studio, resembled a chaotic scene, once again from the Cultural Revolution. He used the easily recognizable format of wall posters from the Cultural Revolution, but drew messages from the surrounding environment to convey the multiple dimensions of contemporary political, social, and economic information. The messages included political slogans like those from the Maoist period, including "Exercise for strength in the class struggle," as well as price notices, advertisements, newspaper titles, commonly used phrases, classical poems, Buddhist texts, traffic signs, weather forecasts, and announcements such as "Comrade Wang, I am back." Lines of ancient poetry and the title of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* also appear in the work. On the floor he wrote four Chinese characters: *wurensbudo*, meaning "nobody can interpret them."



Figure 7.3

Wu Shanzhuan and others, *70% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White*, 1986.



Figure 7.4

Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters*, 1986.

The phrases in *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* can be translated into English as follows:

To pay fine 5 yen / do you want to know how tall
your child will be / wonton soup, steamed turtle fish
/ lottery saving / welcome / 45928 / seat for disabled
and aged / wet paint / the movement of birth control
/ asking for divorce / 24 pieces / we are parasites /
winning a prize from the national committee of
economics / watch shore ahead / parents: newborn
children during 1982–1983 / paint service / box
for complaints / it is selfish / umbrellas for sale /
healing / recipe / kindergarten this way / a broken
wheel / selling stone poles / official study in the
afternoon / dogs / shift to another line / Comrade
Wang: I am back / propaganda letter #87 / to
struggle with selfishness and to criticize revisionism
/ The Last Supper / public toilet / serve the people /
good treatment of skin disease / address for red star
hotel / comrades: if you cross the street during the
red light, you will be fined / baptisms / specialist in
tooth treatment / today no water / boat timetables
/ garbage 3 cents a pound / today it is raining / the
loves of the world stars / pissing forbidden / menu
for today's special / pill for fatty / looking for missing
person: Wu Shanzhuan, male, around 74 meters tall,
long dark hair, wearing glasses, slightly dizzy ... /
one hand carrying reformation, the other carrying
economy / important / intensive / pill for party /
exercise in strengths for class struggle / dating for
marriage / modern poetry movement / *Gone with
Wind* / down with / "for season red" tampons /
superstitions / stop the endless rain / to create a new
style / all rights reserved / nirvana / garbage / seeking
some erotic writing / turn left, there you are / long
life / famous foreign nude paintings / five moon. ...²

When he made the big-character signs, quite a number of additional objects were also produced including buckets, hospital bottles, and rice bowls, among other things, all of which were covered with red paint and words. At the time Wu Shanzhuan was making the *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters*, he also collected many plastic characters. Some were displayed in a transparent box with an electric light inside; some were three-dimensional, others two-dimensional.

The phrases and characters listed above were all found prominently posted on the street, showing the tumult of desires in Chinese society. In the

installation, most of the writing was done by Wu Shanzhuan's friends, including officers, workers, politicians, gamblers, actors, actresses, businessmen, and fishermen whom Wu Shanzhuan invited to be involved in the selection and writing of the phrases.³ *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* took its form from the "red ocean" (*hong haiyang*) of the Cultural Revolution, consisting of posters, flags, red books, and the image of the red sun which symbolized Mao, but it was filled with characters found in daily life at home and on the streets. Creating both lexical and symbolic confusion, this "mistake" produced an absurd image of a particular reality, exposing a cultural deficiency if one were to consider Mao's failed utopian project. *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* conveyed to the audience a deep sense that Chinese society was already far away from the Cultural Revolution.

Wu represented various categories of discourse in conjunction with their contradicting polar opposites, such as serious and ironic, grand and trivial, religious and secular, revolutionary and capitalist, all of which were devoid of the artist's own voice, with the exception of his act of choice. In his theoretical writings of the time, Wu expressed greater interest in the sounds and outward forms of Chinese characters than in their function as language.⁴ Yet, because of the rich eclecticism of the popular language he adopted, the viewer naturally associated the images with many aspects of his or her own experience. Each phrase meant something different depending upon its social, cultural, or political context. Two phrases Wu frequently met on the street, "You will be fined for crossing the street during a red light" (*chuang hongdeng fakuan*) and "Today no water" (*jintian tingshui*), inspired him to use "red humor" (*hongse youmo*) as the major category for all of his individual works. For Wu, the two phrases mentioned above belong to a "red humor" category of symbolic meaning derived from personal experience. Once, when a red light was on, Wu saw nobody on the street: the red light was then a signifier that was sent into a void of reception, negating both its function and meaningfulness. Another time, when Wu was washing his hands, he saw the announcement "Today no water" written by the Local Residential Committee (*Jumin weiyuan hui*) hanging on the wall. Again, the announcement was meaningless, because there was, indeed, water.

The two phrases, and what they signified, were at odds with the real contexts in which they operated, and thus they made nonsense coexist with a visible reality.⁵ This prompted Wu to think further about the Chinese character *chi*, which encompasses two different meanings: both “red” (*hong*) and “empty” (*kui kong*). The meanings of *chi*, thus, are paradoxical and contradictory. On one hand, *chi* (red) represents a specific visible color which ultimately cannot be disassociated from its revolutionary identification in modern Chinese history (in phrases such as Red China, Red Guard, and so on), and the other *chi* (empty) indicates meaninglessness.⁶ It is just such a paradox, surrounding the complexity and ambiguity of the Chinese signifiers for the color red, that made Wu Shanzhuan’s installation and performance works (embodied by *Red Humor*) formidable in their layers of multiple meanings. Furthermore, the reception of these works was extremely complex, given the local, national, and global audiences’ propensity to bring their own meanings to the work. Above all, Wu provided diverse channels for understanding the cultural implications of text, delivered in a compelling visual form.

In his 1986 essay entitled “The Birth of Red Characters” (“Chizi de dansheng”), Wu first analyzed the two different meanings of *chi* as described above, and then discussed his approach to the installation *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters*.⁷ Wu wrote:

I think that *chizi*, namely meaningless characters manifested in original, beautiful outward forms, make much more sense than what we call *wenzi* [language]. In modern art history, we no longer purely paint, because the concept of art has totally changed with modern art history. Currently in China, many artists devote themselves to conceptual art or to rationalist painting, a sort of scholarly painting formed in between a realistic and surrealistic style. This direction, however, will truly make art meaningless [*quikong*] or empty, and art will lose what it used to be. Art finally becomes something cynical and meaningless, like the phrase “You will be fined for crossing the street during a red light.” I am interested in telling a story of this “red humor” to people by presenting it in an extreme visual form which is my work *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters*. The effect is extremely unpredictable and magnificent. *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* is an investigation into the true human condition.⁸

Most installations from Wu’s *Red Humor* series created a political atmosphere without stipulating any concrete political content. The result could be a mockery of society, of politics, and perhaps even of artists themselves. Going one step further, one could say that Wu’s games with the visual language of Chinese politics reduced the deadly phenomenon of the Chinese political movement to nothing more than red humor. Wu, however, tended to investigate the meaning of authorship by denying any incorporation of his own in the meaning of his works. He believed that the Chinese characters themselves were a sufficient form of visual art, requiring no further manipulation. Not only were the characters perfect in form but also, more important, they were completely filled with historical and cultural meaning, so they become independent of man’s subjective meaning. Wu believed that by making choices, artists could select the meaning of language, but they had no ability to give it meaning. With this philosophy in mind, he chose to imitate linguistic forms rather than invent them, by juxtaposing randomly selected phrases and characters in unusual or startling ways. This gave his work an ironic quality. He made no lofty conceptual claims for his installations and performances, or for any of his art. Yet as one talks to Wu, reads his writing, and experiences his work, his humorous and seemingly unsystematic comments begin to make sense.

Wu’s use of simple aphoristic statements and obvious images could be seen as part of an ironic strategy that pushed the viewer to a nonlinear, slightly fragmented, almost intuitive chain of responses that continued well after leaving the space. He asked the viewer to experience a series of interlinking meanings rather than to directly read any one of them. Serious forms from the Cultural Revolution, such as big-character posters with the red, black, and white colors of traditional China, were diluted by the humorous phrases he used. Wu’s Chan Buddhist-like quick wit plunged the viewer into an oddly compelling reality.

In 1987 he finished two other sections of the *Red Humor Series*, *Red Seals* and *Windy Red Flags*. The *Red Seals* consisted of two different types of seals: big, fake, nonsensical official seals fabricated by Wu, as well as some individual, private seals modeled after actual personal seals of the artist’s friends, classmates, and relatives. The pseudo-official seals created by



Figure 7.5

Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor Series, Red Seals*, 1987.

Wu, such as “Committee of Workers for Painting Characters” (*Chizi gongzuo zhe xiehui*) and “Red Character Revolutionary Committee” (*Chizi gongzuo zhe weiyuanhui*), were painted on one-meter-square pieces of rice paper and hung on the wall along with some red flags and nonsense characters. The forms of these signifiers were familiar to the Chinese, recalling the red ocean of the Cultural Revolution.

The official seal has been very important in modern Chinese history. Any official document must bear the stamp of a seal to show its verification by an official unit. An individual’s personal seal, long employed in tradition, remains the most important identification for Chinese individuals, even in contemporary society. *Red Seals* thus generated ambiguous and multifaceted meanings when the official and personal, the public and private, the fake and the real were juxtaposed. The tradition underwent a transformation.

The performance and installation project *Windy Red Flags* included many small-scale revolutionary objects. For instance, as part of a performance, Wu

made a “correct” mark and the two characters *yiyue*, or “I have reviewed,” on an official announcement. In another performance, Wu masqueraded as a new member of the Communist Party in a mock oath-taking ceremony under a red flag. He stood against a wall on which some fake political slogans were written and upon which he had hung many nonsense characters. In another performance, Wu presented himself as the chairman of a political meeting speaking to the public. Once, he even performed as a counterrevolutionary “criminal,” also known as an ox ghost or snake demon (*niugui sheshen*), being criticized and punished by Red Guards.

Thinking of the meaning of the red characters, or *chizi*, Wu Shanzhuan developed his ideas concerning the definition of art and the relationship between the artwork and the artist. He compared the relationship between the artist and his work to that between the soil and the plant. The earth is necessary to the growth of the plant, but the soil does not determine the species of the plant; evolution has already made that selection. Similarly, according to Wu, the artist



Figure 7.6
Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor Series, Windy Red Flags—I Have Reviewed*, 1987.

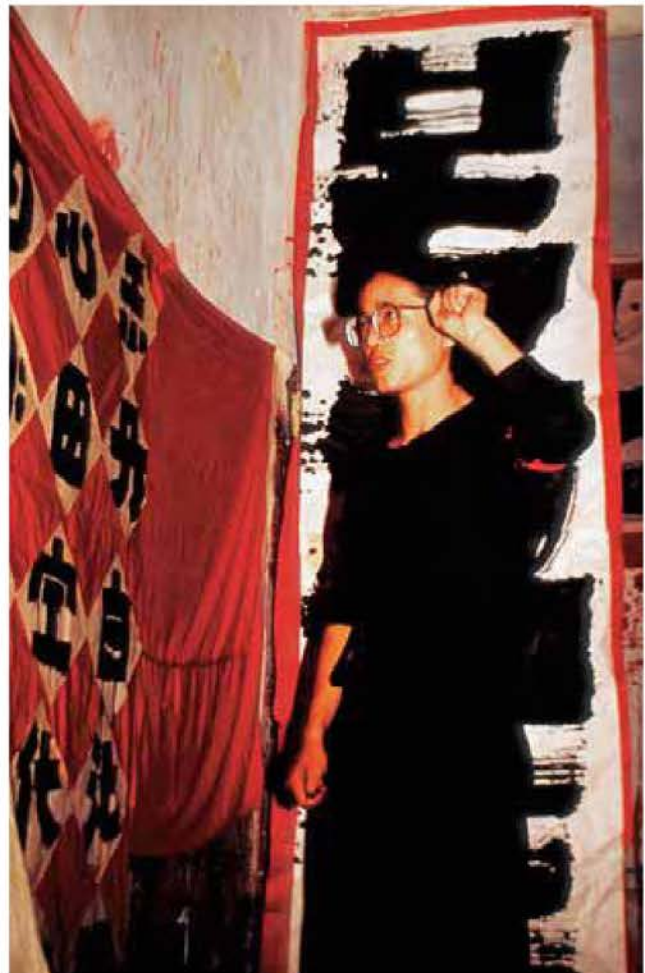


Figure 7.7
Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor Series, Windy Red Flags—Oath*, 1987.

Figure 7.8
Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor Series, Windy Red Flags—Violent Criticism*, 1987.



cannot determine the result of his work. From this point of view, Wu concluded that the art of the Cultural Revolution was different from the politics of the Cultural Revolution. The former was like a plant, and the latter would be the soil.⁹

For Wu, the artist's intentions, or methods of working, were far less important than the work itself. "In the end," he wrote in 1985, "the artwork uses a concrete person (the artist) as a means. The concrete person will die, but the work may continue to exist."¹⁰

Thus, Wu claimed that the artist should not function as the dominant factor of art production. He or she is no more than an object like any art object, i.e., a material. Wu's use of the concept of material and object greatly undermined the idealism and subjectivity initiated by previous utopian artists. His *Red Humor*, filled with various discourses, was a distracted scene of chaotic signifiers made uniform through the use of the color red.

There was a shift in Wu's approach to art, from the purely conceptual to the realistic, in late 1988 and early 1989, when the economic boom reached China. In an article, Wu said, "We should no longer pay attention to the question of what is art by concentrating on the art object; instead we should investigate the social structure and art environment where artworks are located." He used the term *dashengyi*, "big business," to define the new art phenomenon emerging at that time in China. "To visit an art museum is the same as eating breakfast in a restaurant. ... I will return the salt to the ocean and bring it back to those to whom it belongs."¹¹

Noting the impact of commercialism on the Chinese art world of the late 1980s, Wu Shanzhuan pointed out that art activity is a big business at the 1988 Chinese Modern Art Convention (1988 *dangdai yishu yantaohui*) in Tunxi, Anhui province. In the paper he presented at this meeting, Wu said,

1987 was the year when *shengyi* [business] was truly and completely accepted by the Chinese masses. Although some Chinese intellectuals tried to escape from this commercialism, *dashengyi* has become an affair of all Chinese citizens, and for the first time an overwhelming materialism has been tied to the idealistic Chinese intellectuals and business. Soon after, business became unified with art institutions,

scholarship, and political authority. Now business has become a nationalistic affair and recording machine of the successful stories of politics, scholars, monks, popular stars, lawyers, and artists. ... Business art [*shengyi yishu*] has lowered art down to a "business icon" [*shengyi ouxiang*] easily recognized by the masses.¹²

Based on these ideas, Wu created a performance called *Dashengyi* for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in February 1989. It was his first work to completely replace linguistic practice and an overtly political art form with that of daily commerce. The piece involved him carrying 30 kilograms of live shrimp from Zhoushan, the island where he lived, to Beijing, where he sold them at the exhibition's opening. After the opening, and with the enforcement of the official prohibition against performances, he marked his shrimp stand "temporarily closed today for stocktaking" (*jinri panhuo, zhanting yingye*). His typically terse explanation was that art was big business. In a statement on *Dashengyi*, he proclaimed that selling shrimp was a rebellion against the National Art Museum, an official court of opinion that judged art. It was also a criticism of art critics who turned "artworks" into anything that fit their interpretation.¹³



Figure 7.9

Wu Shanzhuan, *Dashengyi—Selling Shrimp*, 1989.

A Metaphor of Meaninglessness in Xu Bing's Art

Xu Bing was born in 1955 in Chongqing, Sichuan province. Well established as a woodcut artist in the early 1980s, Xu devoted himself to creating a number of woodcut prints that might be considered the most impressive “rustic realist” images of printmaking in China. In 1982, he finished his work for his MFA degree by creating a series of woodcut prints depicting the common life of village peasants. The prints were based on sketches made during the period he spent as a “reeducated student” from 1973 to 1977, during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁴ By the middle of the 1980s, Xu had gradually abandoned this thematic concern and begun to explore the unique nature of printed language. In the first half of the 1980s, he received several important national prizes because of his excellent technique and the academic approach of his printmaking. For instance, in the Sixth National Art Exhibition (1984), his woodcut print *Flower and Pencil* was awarded a silver medal. Beginning in the middle 1980s, Xu began to think about how to make printmaking more conceptually sophisticated.

In June 1986, Xu Bing and his colleagues Chen Jinrong, Chen Qiang, and Zhang Jun rolled a big wheel painted with different colors along a long roll of rice paper to make a print work.¹⁵ In the same year, Xu created a five-scroll print entitled *Five Series of Repetitions*, in which he depicted ponds of tadpoles as well as fields of vegetables and grains in a conceptual way. In the work, Xu raised questions about the reproductive nature of

printmaking. He carved a woodblock and then imprinted a long scroll with a sequence of images. In the final composition, a set of images progresses from solid black through successive carvings to solid white, as more and more of the wood is whittled away. Thus, Xu literally dematerialized the object, deconstructing representation as he simultaneously created and destroyed the artwork.¹⁶ Obviously, the subject matter in the prints was no longer the central concern as it had been in his early works; instead, methodology became the major concern.

In his article “The Exploration and Rethinking of the Repetition of Painting” (“Dui fushuxing huihua de xintansuo yu zairenshi”), Xu Bing addresses four major points he raised in the project. First, its distinct visual form and goals depart from that of conventional printmaking, because *Five Series of Repetitions* was printed in an edition of only one unique copy, the original and final. Both the block of wood and the scrolls are the complete work as a whole, as the making of the work destroyed the possibility of its reproduction. Second, it records every remaining detail of the carving process. Third, it reconstructs the relationship between the artwork and audience. Fourth, it presents both the process of the creation and the artist's thoughts.¹⁷ This approach, very importantly, initiated the methods adopted in his two subsequent works *A Book from the Sky* and *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*.

Xu Bing's first major installation piece of this type is *A Book from the Sky*, on which he began work in 1986. It was created from numerous hand scrolls

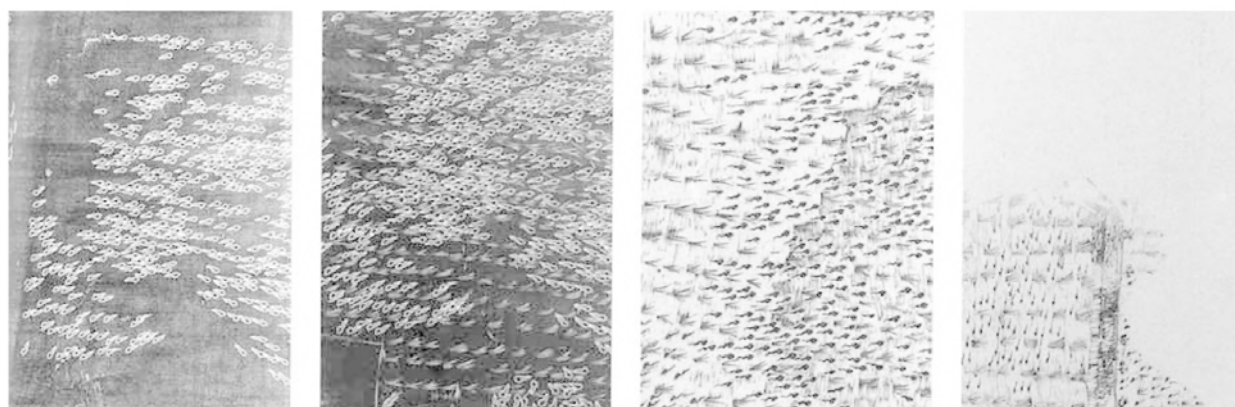


Figure 7.10

Xu Bing, *Five Series of Repetitions*, 1986.



Figure 7.11
Xu Bing, working on *A Book from the Sky*, 1987.

about five hundred feet long, with printed texts that resemble traditional monumental painting styles. There also are boxed sets of books that are bound in blue paper covers and strongly resemble traditional Chinese books. The work was first exhibited in 1988 at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, and subsequently shown in a number of venues in Asia and the West. What was extraordinary was the fact that the thousands of Chinese characters printed on the books and papers were invented by Xu himself. The piece was the product of three years of intensive labor. Xu hand-carved over two thousand pieces of wooden type to print what look like Chinese characters in the Song Dynasty style. None of Xu's characters can be recognized or pronounced. However, since the characters were invented by the artist, composed of rearranged elements from real Chinese characters in the Song Dynasty style, they are still inviting enough to attract the audience to attempt to read or decipher them. When Xu created the two thousand nonsense characters, he knew that in reality there are two thousand characters that make sense. The paradoxical interaction between the work's superficial, textual meaninglessness and the diverse cultural understandings of the readers makes the piece unpredictable.¹⁸

Xu Bing's artworks might be seen as another kind of destruction of traditional culture. The desire for destruction apparently relates to the anti-



Figure 7.12
Xu Bing, blocks made for *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–1991.



Figure 7.13
Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, 1989.

ideological stance of the generation of artists of the '85 Movement, who were tired of the previous Maoist utopia and its state-dominant ideology. Xu's approach, however, was not to erase writing and the texts themselves, but rather to create many fake characters and a nonsensical text with a significantly monumental, legitimate, and classical form in a deconstructive way. On the other hand, through his complete avoidance of legibility in the text, Xu somehow removed all semantic significance from the splendid monument, a myth and symbol of authority.

The space created in Xu Bing's work related to a traditional Chinese philosophical idea of "emptiness" (*xu*) or "nothingness" (*wu*), a crucial concept in Chan Buddhism and Daoism. In Chan thought, the moment of the realization of "emptiness" is the moment in a person's experience when the mind is opened to discover a richer realm of truth, namely enlightenment.¹⁹ Xu Bing's approach to meaninglessness in his art was apparently influenced by the concepts of *xu* and *wu*. He wrote in a short article:

For more than a year I ceaselessly invented, carved, and printed a set of twelve volumes of "Nonsense Writing" (*A Book from the Sky*) which no one in this world can understand. The unbelievable amount of work threw its audience into confusion. 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 these papers 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 Dao. 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. ...

Nowadays the art world has become an arena. What do I want from it? Handing one's work to society is just like driving animals into a slaughterhouse. The work no longer belongs to me; it has become the property of all the people who have touched it. It is now concrete and filthy. I hope to depart from it, looking for something different in a quiet place.²⁰

While the Chinese conceptualists, such as Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan, and Huang Yongping, used ideas from traditional Chan Buddhism as a foundation of their contemporary art approach, and saw Dadaism as a borrowed model of destruction, the concepts used by these artists differ. For instance, the difference between Xu Bing and Huang Yongping parallels that between the Northern and Southern schools of Chan Buddhism. Xu's long period of labor to create an empty space of meaning may be compared to the Northern School of Chan, which emphasized gradual enlightenment. The Southern School's emphasis on sudden enlightenment is more like what we find in Huang Yongping's concept of Dada-like destruction and Wu Shanzhuan's natural and spontaneous juxtapositions. All of them, however, share the common idea of *wu*, or nonbeing and nothingness, based in traditional Daoist philosophy. And this concept of *wu*, as used by the artists, was not for the pure enjoyment of a traditional philosophical game; rather it was for a deep expression of their feelings about contemporary reality.

Xu Bing's second major installation was his *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, a three-story-high ink rubbing taken from a section of the Great Wall. As displayed in the Elvehjem Museum at the University of Wisconsin in late 1991, the work involved massive black-and-white scrolls hung from ceiling to floor across the building's central court. At the lower end was a mound of dirt that looked like a tomb, pinning the scrolls to the floor.²¹

Xu Bing and his crew labored in the Badaling Mountains in a rural area near Beijing for twenty-four days in 1990 to make impressions of the surface of the Great Wall, using a technique traditionally employed for reproducing fine carvings of calligraphy. Over the course of several months, the ink-smudged sheets of Chinese paper were reassembled and mounted. For Xu, the expenditure of utmost effort was necessary to create an imposing psychological and physical space similar to the space of the Great Wall itself. Yet the piled earth of the tomb at the foot of Xu's paper Great Wall is an obvious symbol of death. The confrontation between the splendid, if ghostly, paper representation of the Great Wall and the nihilistic physical presence of the earthen grave mound raises doubts about the purpose of human effort, not only questioning the

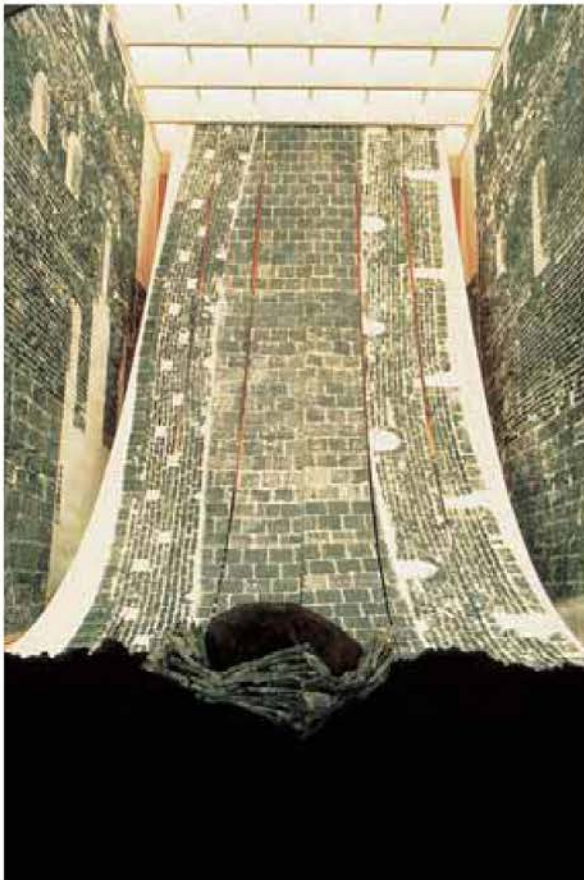


Figure 7.14
Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, 1990–1991.

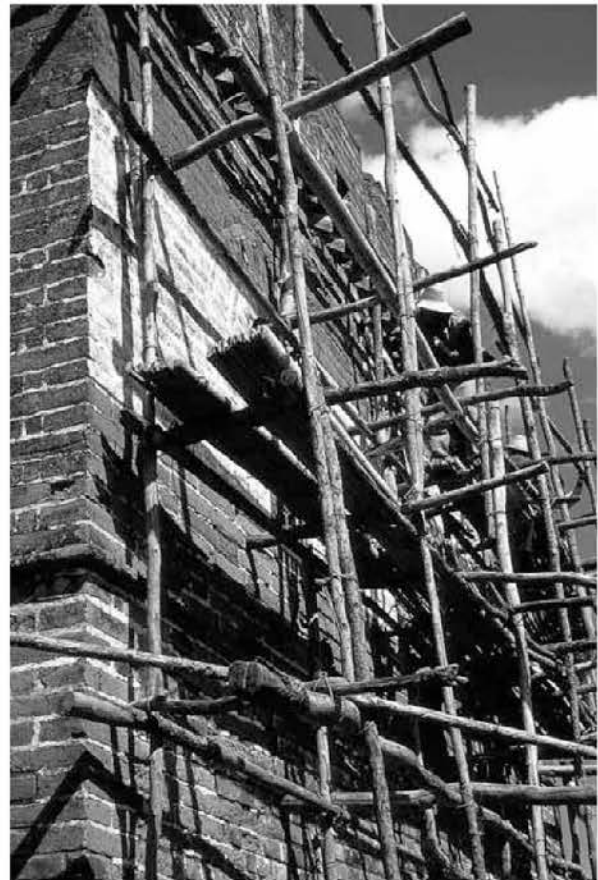


Figure 7.15
In 1990, Xu Bing and his crew spent twenty-four days making ink impressions of the Great Wall for *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*.

artist's replication of the rough and inelegant surface of the Great Wall, but more generally questioning all human effort, including the labor required for the construction of the original Great Wall.

In the twentieth century, the powerful image of the Great Wall has become a symbol of the greatness of China, as it is one of the largest man-made constructions in the world and the product of two thousand years of labor. During the Anti-Japanese War, it was also a symbol of national salvation and defense against the invasion of the Japanese. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the image of the Great Wall, along with certain industrial landscapes, symbolized a reunified, newborn modern state. Recall that Shi Lu's 1954 painting *Changcheng wai*, or *Beyond the Great Wall* (see figure 1.13), for instance, pictures the happiness of the Mongolian minority people in the unity of the new modern China,

while exemplifying the enjoyment of modernization as symbolized by a railroad reaching the outside of the Great Wall. The area beyond the Great Wall was traditionally a contested space between the Han people and the northern nomads. But now the Han and the barbarians are unified. Since the Cultural Revolution, avant-garde artists have used the image, and even the sites, of the Great Wall to further their new project of Chinese modernity by ambivalently using this symbol of nationalism. Thus, the Wall has become an ambiguous social force and powerful symbol of a nation that needs modern strength, on one hand, and a conservative state-ideological power on the other. The Wall no longer exists as an eternal symbol of greatness; on the contrary, it is now seen as weak and dubious under the impact of Western modernization and the control of its own totalizing power. The skepticism adopted by the avant-garde

and reflected in the Great Wall project can be found in many performance works and conceptual art projects dealing with the Wall. For instance, in a performance by a group of artists called Concept 21 Group, the artists masqueraded as wounded people who were helpless against the powerful symbol of the Great Wall.

Xu Bing may have been conveying a similar message in his installation. Scholarly research suggests that the Wall actually was built over a much shorter period than popularly thought and that it was strategically useless as a defensive border in its own day.²² In his simulation of the Great Wall, Xu Bing embodies the meaninglessness of its construction through his own exhausting activity of pounding the wall with ink-drenched wads of cloth. Even the title *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* conveys the meaninglessness of human effort, relating as it does to a popular Chinese folktale in which a traveler, lost in the middle of the night, keeps walking in circles as if ghosts had built a wall around him to prevent him from continuing in his chosen direction. In spite of its purported meaninglessness,

however, the work echoes with meanings related to China's politics and social reality. The artist seems to mock himself and the futility of his own exertions; he is unable, even with extraordinary effort, to do anything about his own circumstances and environment, like his ancestors confined by the barrier of the real wall or the traveler surrounded by an imaginary one. On the other hand, Xu's work could also be considered a strong criticism of the conservative authority in contemporary Chinese society. Xu noted that Gu Yanwu (1613–1682), a Chinese scholar, described the Great Wall as the product of conservative minds, intent on the impossible goal of closing China off from the rest of the world as if in a giant garden: although the wall was strong and was guarded by a powerful military, the nature of humankind rendered its purpose futile. The meaninglessness of the Great Wall here evokes cultural confrontations of various kinds: between the real creative power of China's ancient people and its simulation by the contemporary artist; or between China's heritage of national greatness and its current reality.



Figure 7.16
Chinese soldiers guarding the Great Wall, 1933.



Figure 7.17

Concept 21 Group, *Saving People from Death*, one series of performances on the Great Wall, 1988.

Gu Wenda's *The Pseudo-Characters*, 1984–1986

Gu Wenda has also been involved in an art- and language-based project since the mid-1980s. Gu was born in 1955 in Shanghai, and trained in the Department of Chinese Painting of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in the early 1980s. Between 1982 and 1985, Gu, who has great technical facility in traditional Chinese painting, tried to use modern Western forms, especially that of surrealism, to remold traditional Chinese painting. Although he himself has largely abandoned traditional painting since, this phase of his career did influence a generation of younger artists, creating a new school of ink painting referred to as “universal current” (*yuzhouliu*). Gu’s ink painting style has been recognized as a sort of “new scholarly painting” (*xin xuezhe huibua*). However, after this phase, he applied his efforts to installation and conceptual art.

Unlike Wu Shanzhuan, who used language to investigate the meaning of authorship, and Xu Bing, who devoted himself to revealing a meaningless

language world by creating a monument of nonsense, Gu Wenda’s language project aimed to destroy the underlying structure of the Chinese system of building characters while maintaining its calligraphic style, thus creating a conflict between concept and aesthetic pleasure. This conflict expressed Gu’s skepticism about human rational capability. He turned traditional archetypal calligraphy on its head, using upside-down, reversed, incorrectly written, and restructured characters on huge sheets of Chinese paper. His 1984–1986 series *The Pseudo-Characters* used splashed ink on rice paper. The strategy of Gu’s destruction was to write calligraphy by imitating the style of classic masters, using nonsense (or wrong-sense) characters. Once, he invited three women and three men to write the same Chinese character (*jing*, or “still”) using an incorrect structure of the elements and their different individual styles. Then, like a traditional calligraphy teacher, Gu made red marks, using a circle to mark a correction and a cross to indicate a mistake. In 1987, even in writings such as letters to friends and essays published in magazines,



Figure 7.18

Gu Wenda, *A World in Calm Observation 2*, 1985.



Figure 7.19

Gu Wenda, *Pseudo-Characters Series—Silence*, 1986.

Gu deliberately punctuated texts at random, consciously departing from conventional literary practices.²³ Gu's skepticism about language and his conceptual process encompassing the essence of the nature of things had a special resonance in Chinese culture, because the written language is ideographic rather than alphabetic. Therefore, the Chinese language is imbued with far greater metaphysical meaning than Western written languages. With *The Pseudo-Characters*, Gu sought to destroy the system of syntax and grammar that carried so many aesthetic and cultural connotations for so many millennia in traditional Chinese society.

The New Mark Group and Its Tactile Art

Yet another way to undermine the significance of concepts, language, and authorship was adopted by the New Mark Group, which consisted of three artists—Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping, and Gu Dexin—who worked on the *New Analysis* project for eight years, from 1987 to 1995. Decrying the individualism of contemporary art, they sought to expunge subjectivity by creating a rationalized discipline to order the artist's mind. The group developed a set of rules agreed upon by all three artists before they began to make objects. Their first group project was *Tactile Art* (*Chujue yishu*) of 1988, which was a series of diagrams variously showing temperatures, the sizes of spaces, and the categories of human feelings. The viewer is meant to examine and judge the data presented in the diagrams.

What the artists of the group sought to achieve in the *Tactile Art* project was to liquidate rationality directed by language, which can only handle certain kinds of concepts. Although *Tactile Art* still used these concepts, as Chinese characters and numbers appeared in the diagrams, their function was to awaken the sleeping tactile sense and liberate it from various constraints, such as goals and concepts, in order to endow the tactile sense with new significance. The characters and numbers indicating temperatures and feelings in the diagrams, such as *shiwai ershiliu du* (exterior 26 degrees) and *shou wo shou* (hand in hand), "are not about themes, descriptions, happiness, sadness, anger, or pleasure; neither are they about truth itself, nor rhyming schemes,

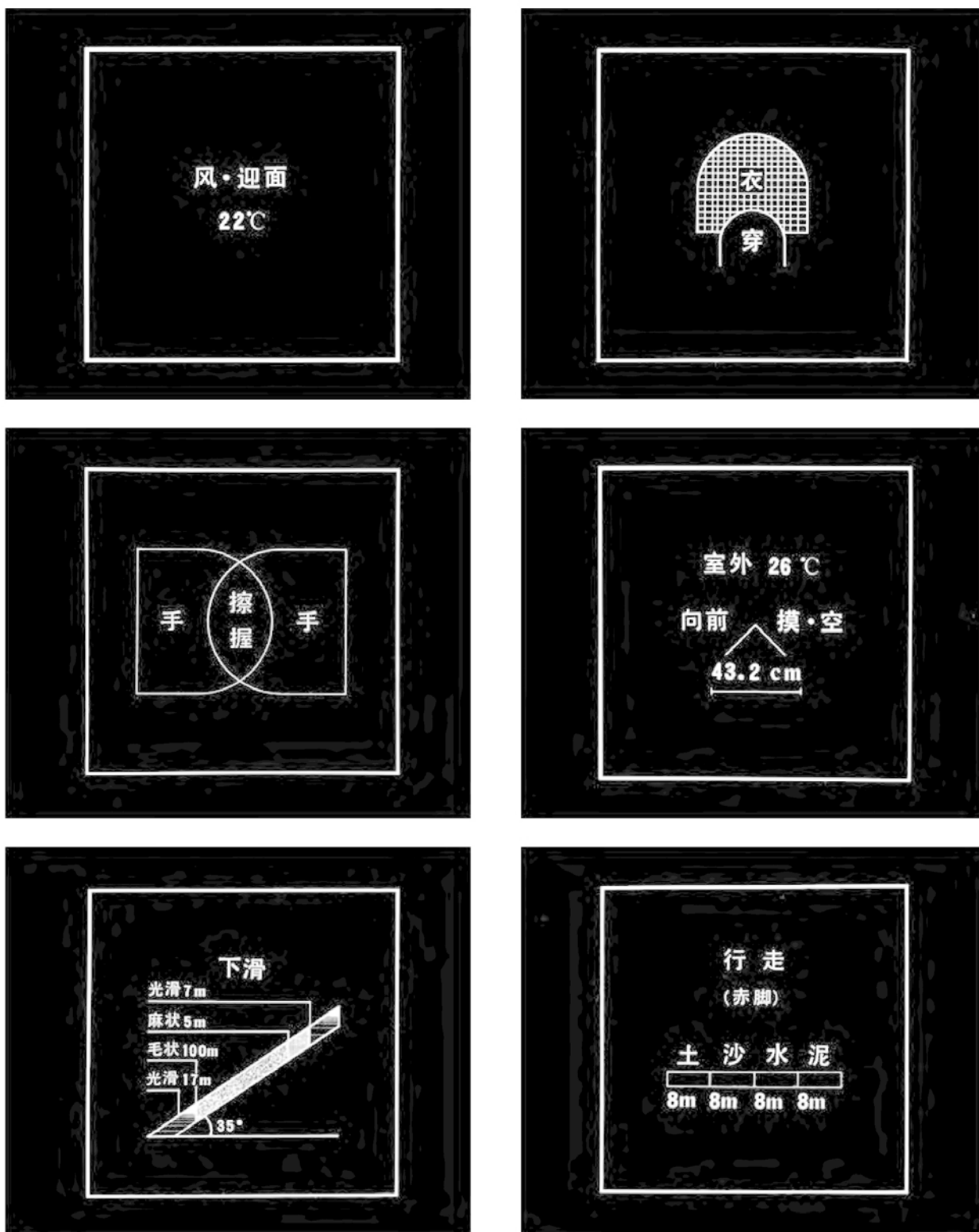


Figure 7.20
The New Mark Group (Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping, Gu Dexin),
Tactile Art, 1988.

phonetics, forms, expressions, rhythm, intuitions, illusions, consciousness, or unconsciousness. Rather, they are a pure, delicate, and thorough contact between human body and outside world.”²⁴ This presented an extremely closed, individual experience with maximum freedom. There was no need to communicate and exchange meaning, wherein lies the project’s essential significance. According to Wang Luyan, tactile art was not something used by the artists to show off, but was the fastest, most direct approach that could arouse a universal reaction from all people. The artists are no different from people at large; they no longer influence or torment the public with extremely narrow terms, like art that seeks a unique individual character.

In the conclusion of the group’s manifesto, Wang Luyan wrote, “They and others exist together in a tranquil and pure space of tactile art with no explanations, understanding, exploration, or communication. Those vulgar and meaningless phenomena, such as condescending artists making indiscreet remarks, creating a man-made gap, are gone. There is no incomprehensibility, no liking and disliking. What the artists and common people get is maximum freedom and relaxation, which can be easily obtained by relaxing yourself. Through the boundless space of tactile art, artists and people in general alike will own a free and new kingdom.”²⁵

Gray Humor and the Pool Society

In 1985, an important avant-garde group led by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi was established in Hangzhou, one of the most important ancient capital cities in China. The city was located on the shore of West Lake (*Xihu*), one of the most famous traditional landscape sites in China. In the early twentieth century, the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, under its former name of Hangzhou National Academy of Art (*Hangzhou guoli yizhuan*), played an important role in the modern Chinese art movements of the early twentieth century. Some leading Chinese artists of that movement, such as Lin Fengmian, the first director of Hangzhou National Academy of Art, were ambitious to found a new modern Chinese art system by combining traditional art with Western modern art, and this concept influenced many generations

of Chinese artists in the twentieth century. Some artists involved in the left-wing woodcut movement of the 1930s, such as Hu Yichuan and Jiang Feng, were trained in the Hangzhou National Academy of Art and later participated in the Anti-Japanese War and in Mao’s revolution at his famous communist base in Yan’an during the 1930s and 1940s. Almost forty years later, a new generation of avant-garde artists trained at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art took another step toward a revolution in art when they played leading roles in the ’85 Movement. Huang Yongping, Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan, Wang Guangyi, Zhang Peili, and Geng Jianyi, whom I have mentioned above, all graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art and founded some of the most influential avant-garde groups, such as Huang Yongping’s Xiamen Dada and Wang Guangyi’s Northern Art Group.

Two of the leading artists of the ’85 Movement, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, devoted themselves to a Hangzhou-based avant-garde movement from the middle of the 1980s into the 1990s. They created numerous artworks in various media including painting, installation, performance, and conceptual art. Regardless of the specific significance of using different media, the group of artists around them, called the Pool Society (*Chishe*), was characterized by two major points. First, they opposed the notion that art should function to bring happiness and pleasure to the public; instead, they employed different painting styles, materials, and rules to try to find any means of making the audience uneasy. Geng Jianyi said, “Basically, we are opposed to the simple American-style happiness which seems to be a beautiful state, a state changing from life to death, thus a state of escapism. If we create a form which brings about sleepiness in the audience, that would be a debacle for us.”²⁶ Second, they recognized that most people were accustomed to emotionless behavior, preferring a life without vitality and fresh air, while categorizing all existing art forms into a set pattern of knowledge. Therefore, what the Pool Society did was to create conceptual traps that would imitate what they considered insensitive reality by exploiting certain numb images and boring rules, all in order to stimulate people to engage with their art. They played this serious game with materials and

language to closely investigate the difference between human contact and isolation, as well as to expose the human condition from a demystification viewpoint.

Soon after he graduated from the Zhejiang Academy in 1984, Zhang Peili and his fellow young artists Zha Li, Bao Jianfei, Song Ling, Wang Qiang, and Xu Jin founded a group called the Youth Creative Society (*Qinnian chuangzao she*). Demonstrating an admiration for modern ideas and rationalist language oriented toward anti-expressionism, the Youth Creative Society's first group exhibition was entitled "85 New Space" ("Bawu xinkongjian"). It opened in the Gallery of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art on December 2, 1985. Twelve artists, including Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, participated in this show, which featured fifty-three examples of "gray humor" paintings.

Zhang Peili was born 1957 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. He has taught in the Hangzhou School of Graphic Art since 1984. In the 1985 exhibition he displayed four oil paintings on two different topics: music and swimming. In his *Please Enjoy Jazz* (*Qing xinshang jue shiyue*), a drummer standing stiffly and a rigidly sitting trumpeter exist in a triangular composition, without sentimentality, in a dark gray, empty, and unspecific background. Similar in style, *Swimming* (*Yongzhe*) and *Summer Swimming* (*Zhongxia de yongzhe*) transform a familiar urban space into an inanimate cosmos-planet space where people live indifferently as if they were mechanomorphic human beings.

Geng Jianyi was born in Zhengzhou, Henan province, in 1962. He graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in 1985 and has taught in the Zhejiang Silk College. In the "85 New Space" show, Geng Jianyi's *The First Haircut in the Summer of 1985* (*Yijiu bawunian xiaji de diyige guangtou*) presented a person getting a haircut in a cosmic space, instead of in a barbershop.

We may characterize this group of paintings as "gray humor" (*huise youmo*), as they are definitively marked by a cynical tone. Reacting to an inevitable, but unfamiliar, urban modernization and the consequent alienation among people, and between society and the individual, this trend formulated human figures of various classifications while

generalizing them with indifference and numbness. These paintings presented a neutralizing attitude and a new realistic technique that duplicated the referent, not to represent but rather to project it into a decontextualized frozen moment in time. Then the real, or original, referents become slightly surreal and a distance is created between artist, image, and audience. The artists attempted to shock the public through cynical and insensitive images that allegorized reality. In a statement, Zhang Peili said, "I refuse to give the audience any comfortable means of appreciation or aesthetic pleasure in my work. The images in my paintings are lashing people with a heavy whip in order to wake up their numb minds and insensitive condition."²⁷

After a number of intense discussions, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Song Ling, Bao Jianfei, Wang Qiang, and Wang Ying founded an artists' group called the Pool Society on May 27, 1986. They felt the need to find a new way to continue their explorations after the accomplishments of the "85 New Space" exhibition. In their announcement of the founding of the Pool Society, they said, "We seek to ultimately express our ideas. We attempt to have a pure experience in searching for an intuitive condition. We will formulate our practice in any useful way, whether traditional or contemporary, unique or common. We are concerned that the process of the practice involve everybody's interest, regardless of the specific material goal of artistic creation."²⁸

The name Pool is a metaphor of a condition of enlightenment, a situation of intermixture. The following is excerpted from the manifesto of the Pool Society:

Art is a pool.

Our survival relies on carbohydrates.

What we are doing is not what we want to do, but what we must do.

Our bodies are completely dusty.

Can people benefit from art activity?

Is artwork for appreciation and visual pleasure?

We pursue a proper purification.

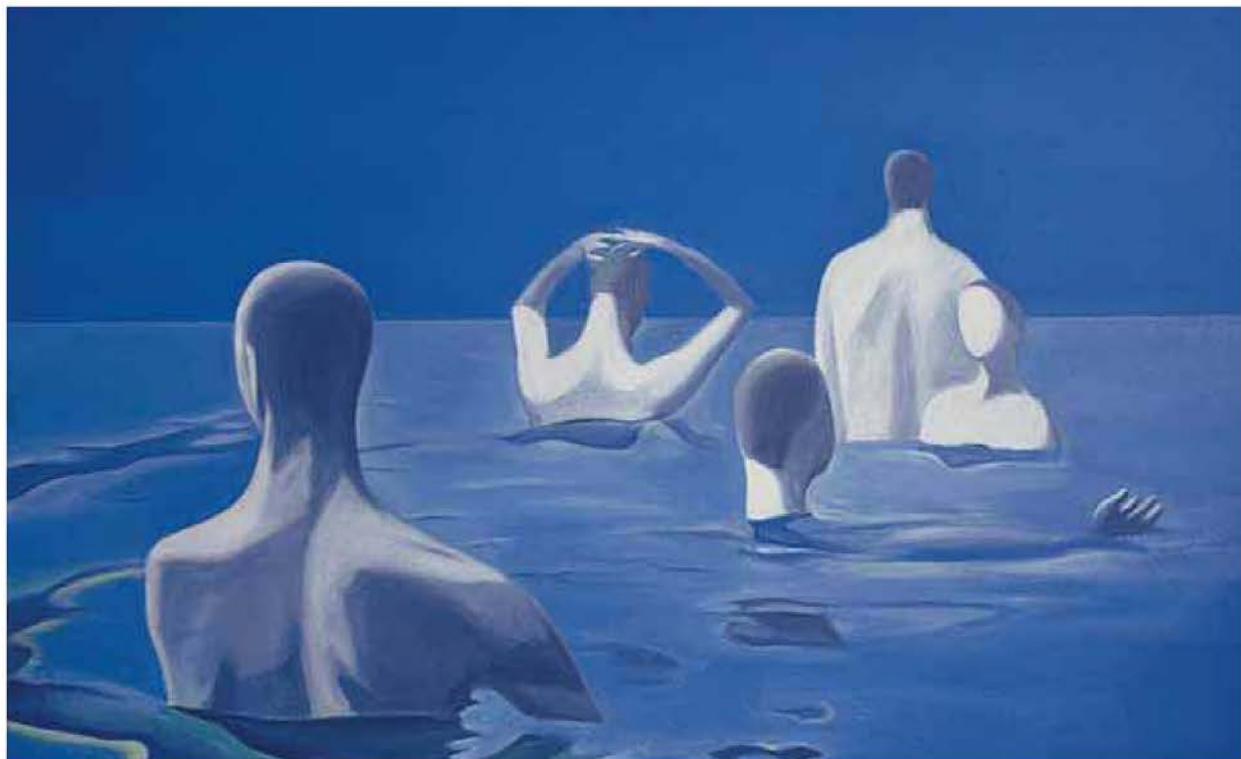




Figure 7.21

Zhang Peili, *Please Enjoy Jazz*, 1985.

Figure 7.22

Zhang Peili, *Swimming*, 1985.

Figure 7.23

Geng Jianyi, *The First Haircut in the Summer of 1985*, 1985.

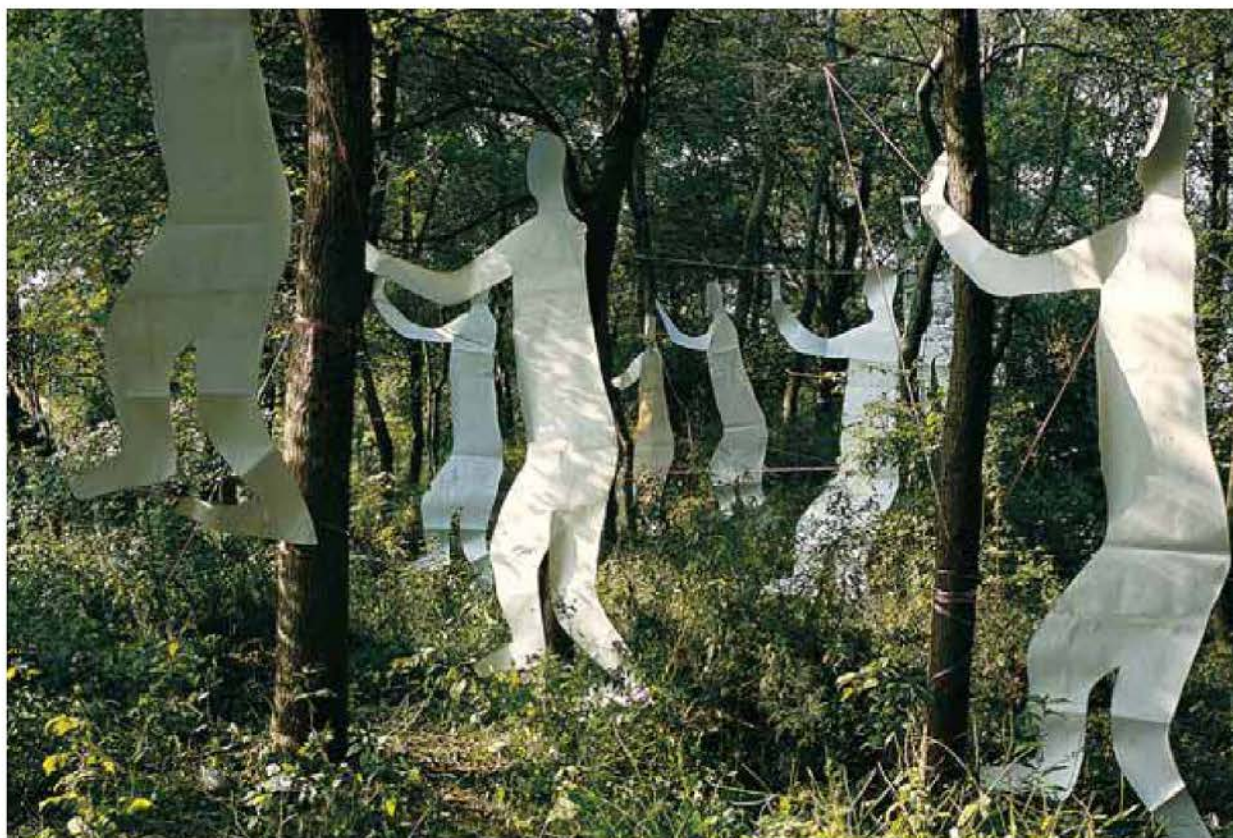


Figure 7.24

Pool Society, *The Travelers in a Green Space No. 2*, 1986.



Figure 7.25

Geng Jianyi and Song Ling, *King and Queen No. 3*, 1986.

Our thinking is stream-of-consciousness and irrational.

We strive to catch up with our intuitive energy.

The alienation of art is rational, mechanical, and reproduction is determined by certain pragmatic goals.

We intend to reach the sublime moment when we are tired but excited.

It is important to get into fusion.

Has anybody ever experienced a sort of rational impulse?

The moment of fusion makes you thrilled, and a wakening moment enlightens you.

We admire connotations on a “high level,” and pay great attention to them.

The result is less important. The plan will come to fruition, if there is a seed.

Truth cannot be verbalized.²⁹

The first group activity of the Pool Society took place from 9:00 a.m. on June 1 to 4:00 p.m. on June 2, 1986, in Hangzhou. The project was called *Yang's Taiqi Series No. 1 (Yang-Style Taiqi)*, with twelve individual pieces, each of which were three meters high, consisting of diagrams in the form of paper cuts representing the twelve different programs of the Yang style of the martial art *taiqi* (tai chi). The panels were posted on a wall on Nianshan Road, located on the shore of West Lake. The artists of the Pool Society were very excited about this nonprofit, purely spiritual activity. Zhang Peili said, “It was not a novel gaming activity, nor a well-designed experimental art project; it was an honest and natural dialogue between the artists and the people walking on the street.”³⁰ According to Geng Jianyi, however, the work was not created just for the enjoyment and happiness of artists and audience. Rather, they attempted to create something strong and obviously strange enough to stimulate the audience.³¹ Five months later, a similar project, entitled *The Travelers in a Green Space No. 2 (Luse kongjian zhong de xingzhe, dierhao)* was completed by the group. Nine paper-cut diagrams of Yang-style art were hung on the trees in some woods near West Lake.³²

Around the same time, the Pool Society artists did two performances. One was called *King and Queen No. 3 (Guowang he wanghou disanhao)*, in which the artists Geng Jianyi and Song Ling were wrapped with newspaper while sitting on a similar newspaper-wrapped branch. The “king” and “queen” assumed many different positions, while gesturing as if they were mechanomorphic persons made of newspaper. The other performance was called *Baptism No. 4 (Xili disihao)*. Song Ling entered a wooden box, and other artists put newspapers in it until Song was completely buried by the papers.³³



Figure 7.26

Song Ling, *Baptism No. 4*, 1986.

Metaphorical Abuse in the Reception of Art: Works by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi in the Late 1980s

From 1987 to 1989, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi created a number of paintings, installations, and conceptual proposals. Most notably, Zhang painted a series of oil paintings called the *X? Series* (*X? xilie*). The primary images in the paintings are clinical chairs and gloves. Before he started to paint, he wrote down a series of steps in order, which he intended to strictly follow. He duplicated photographs of hospital-like clinical chairs and surgical gloves in about one hundred large oil paintings in which numbers marked on the canvas point to different parts of the subject, all of which related to a methodical set of paint-by-numbers instructions. Zhang then published these instructions in an article that also laid down strict conditions for the display and viewing of the *X? Series*. For instance, only visitors taller than 4'3" and shorter than 5'8" were to be admitted to the exhibition. People wearing colors from the red and yellow color family as well as lovers and couples were not allowed to visit

it. The visitors had to follow a set route through the exhibition, and discussion was prohibited.³⁴ Zhang's work commonly dealt with states of helplessness and pain, using forms derived from the world of clinical medical apparatuses as the leitmotif. In this series, his punitive attitude toward the viewers was believed to be a reaction to previous public apathy expressed during his earlier public art projects.

In 1988, Zhang Peili created a performance/object work entitled *A Report on the Hepatitis Infection in 1988* (*Guanyu yijiubabanian jiagan chuanran de baogao*). An installation of the same title made of glass, surgical gloves, lacquer, and plaster powder was displayed in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in 1989. In his childhood, Zhang had experienced a prolonged illness, and during that time he was touched only by people wearing surgical gloves. Gloves became an obsessive lexical maker of traumatic memory for him. They signified a point of contact that was simultaneously a point of isolation. During the hepatitis epidemic of 1988, Zhang sent a series of anonymous parcels containing surgical

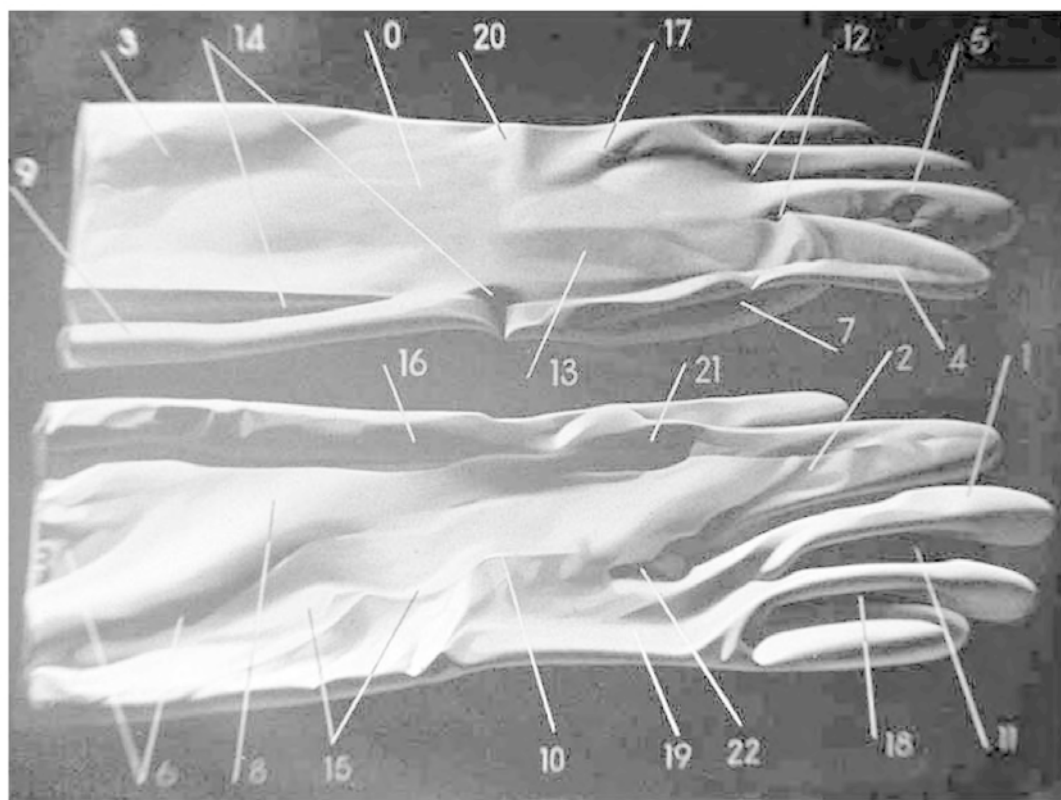


Figure 7.27
Zhang Peili, *X? Series*, 1986.



Figure 7.28

Zhang Peili, *A Report on the Hepatitis Infection in 1988*, 1988.



Figure 7.30

Zhang Peili, *Brown Book #1*, 1988.



Figure 7.29

Zhang Peili, *A Report on the Hepatitis Infection in 1988*, detail, 1988.

rubber gloves, or parts of gloves, to important figures in the Chinese art world. The last consignment included a letter informing them that the parcels had nothing to do with their moral behavior, but that they must not try to contact the other recipients or the sender.³⁵ This installation/performance project was called *Brown Book #1* (*Hepishu yihao*).

After late 1988, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi started to pay more attention to real communication, but in a very cynical and allegorical way. Zhang spelled out his approach in the following statement: "The undertaking of an extreme anti-art project, extending the grounds of artistic language and expanding media, seems to offer numerous possibilities: but in actuality, what we really can select and make use of for our own purposes is limited. In the end, economy and sparseness of language [are] a virtue."³⁶ All of Zhang's projects dramatize this communicational reality. From 1987 to 1988, he began to construct harsh, and extremely rigid, rules governing the exhibition and viewing of his artworks. After *Brown Book #1*, Zhang created a similar project called *Art Plan #2* (*Yishujihua erhao*). Also dating from 1987, it was a twenty-page list of instructions. According to Zhang, this instructional plan concerned talking and peeping. The whole plan included eight parts: 1. Talking, peeping, the right of talking and the right of peeping. 2. The nature, rights, duties and number of talkers, peepers, and

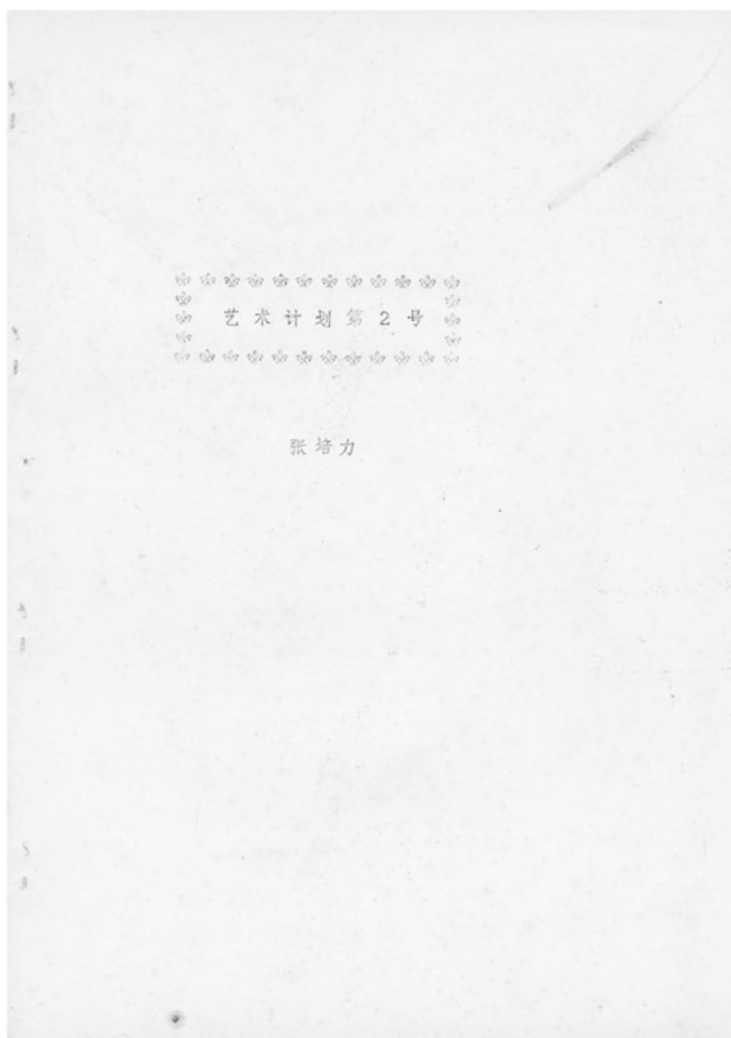
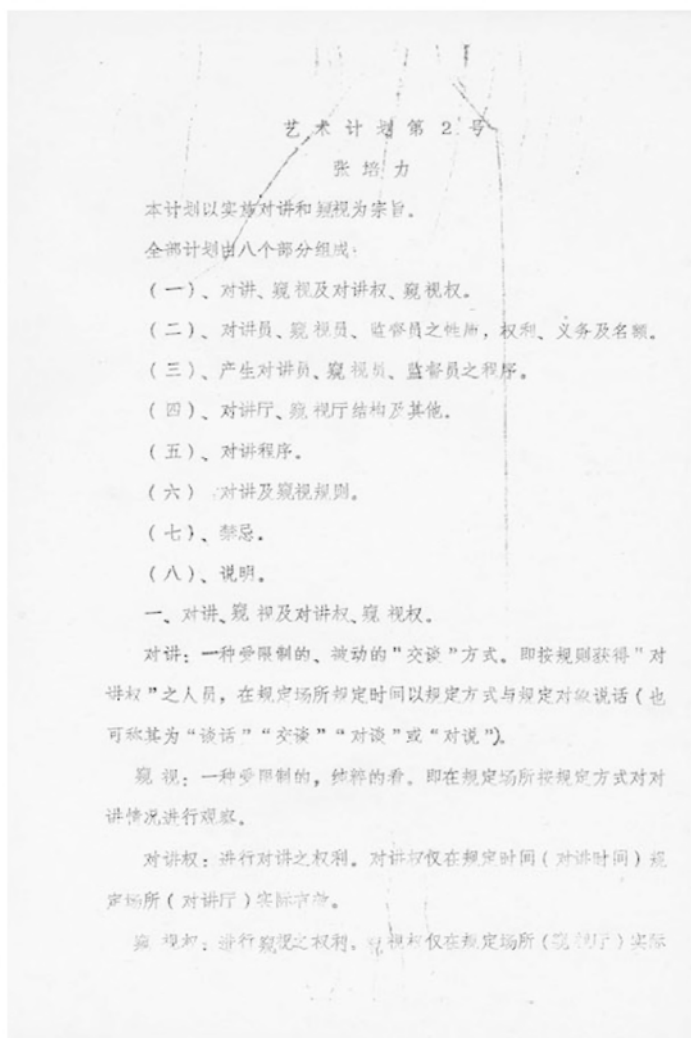


Figure 7.31

Zhang Peili, *Art Plan #2*, 1987.



Figure 7.32

Geng Jianyi, *Second State*, 1987.

supervisors. 3. Procedures to select talkers, peepers, and supervisors. 4. A description of the talking room and the peeping room. 5. A description of the talking procedure. 6. Rules for talking and peeping. 7. Prohibitions. 8. Directions. In each part of the plan, Zhang specified in minute and tedious detail the conditions under which people should be admitted to an art exhibition. For instance, visitors must again be taller than 4'3" and shorter than 5'8"; they should not speak, and they were required to follow a marked route with mathematical precision.

Elsewhere, in 1987, Geng Jianyi painted a set of large oils entitled *Second State*. Each painting portrayed the face of his colleague Song Baoguo, another leading avant-garde artist and a teacher at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art. The paintings show a huge, robotic face that seems to be grimacing, but actually is an overemphasized and exaggerated image of Song's visage in different moments of laughing. The complete hysteria presented by the paintings is caused, not by an excessive or uncontrollable emotion, such as fear or panic, but rather by a rational, controlled, and highly cynical attitude. Geng Jianyi painted this series in many different formats. He composed different works with various numbers of panels; the largest consists of four panels. The viewer may think that the paintings focus on embarrassing situations of everyday life, or the portrayal of alienation and the hypocrisy of human relationships. The approach of Geng Jianyi was "the principle of attack," targeting accepted

norms of behavior and everyday rules.³⁷ In Geng's own statement written on August 20, 1987, when he and two other artists of the Pool Society, Zhang Peili and Song Ling, all began new painting series, he raised four major points to explain the paintings:

1. *Principle of thriftiness in using color* Years of research on color has distanced us from the intoxication of color, and we no longer care about psychological pleasures. In creating a series of works, the Pool Society confines its use of colors to three kinds, rendering paintings virtually in monochrome by careful manipulation of them. We have a theoretical backing for insisting upon this approach, i.e., drawing the audience's attention to monochrome form that belongs to a spiritual sphere. We have always believed in our ability to catch the function of solid and stable forms. This does not mean that the Pool Society ignores colors. All of us used to employ a myriad of colors to express the shapes of feelings and wonderful rhythms to make the audience relaxed and joyful. It is only because we no longer need a sense of flowing. To be exact, the Pool Society in choosing this direction (very decisively) has made a sacrifice, running counter to the principle of sensual pleasure held by most people. We hope to use our principle of thriftiness to appeal to the audience on the metaphysical plane.

2. *Directness* Aside from presenting a strong sense of scale, it creates, most importantly, nearsightedness in the audience [*jinshiyan de guanzhong*]. When people discern all the details within the prescribed

focal distance (or they are too nearsighted to see anything), they are forced into reactions that do not come out in a natural way. We are fully aware of wrong judgments resulting from the fact that audience members tend to fill gaps by subconsciously utilizing their past life and aesthetic experiences. It is not our intention to satisfy some in the audience who tend to regard themselves as experts and are interested in continuing to increase their knowledge. There used to be a lukewarm, ambiguous relationship between artworks and audiences, which enhanced the desire to acquire knowledge and other unhealthy habits of the audience. What we want to promote is a direct relationship with the audience, which can serve to eliminate the possibility of misunderstanding. The reaction on the part of the audience can only be genuine in this relationship, coming from their gut instincts rather than from knowledge.

3. *Without comment* Of all the approaches, the creative process of the Pool Society is the simplest and best-knit. First of all, various images are created out of medical instruments, expressive tools, and species of life. The images are then made permanent by a camera before being enlarged in scale and their gaps filled with coordinates. Efforts are made to avoid any “traffic accident” whenever the brush is applied and during the connecting process, so that the paintings look very objective, without the vitality of life. It is presenting only an investigative report that contains nothing but facts. We are only concerned with its authenticity and exactness.

4. *Repetitious function* What makes *X.?*, *Second State*, and *Meaningless Choice* [Wuyiyi de xuanze] markedly different from customary paintings on canvas? No component painting in any of these series is valid as an independent entity. They have to be connected with the others to form a unified whole. As a result, repetition is inevitable. Any form will repeat its past manifestations in a slightly different manner; this is similar to the forms common in religious rituals. We believe this is also a pure art approach. Let us look at the repetitious effect of various religious rites. Ranging from similar attire, behaviors, or banners to the repetitious ringing of bells, speaking of slogans, nonstop singing of hymns, and dancing, the rites have made countless souls excited by their infiltrating power. They cause a spontaneous conditioned reflex; yet they also bring people back to their past, mysterious experiences. We are also considering what effects the repetition employed by the Pool Society can have on us.

Zhang Peili's *X.? Series* is to be composed of 144 single paintings (and include the spatial effect of the room in which they are hung); only six of them have been accomplished to date. Three components of *Meaningless Choice* by Song Ling, *Ox*, *Sheep*, and *Dog*, have been finished. Similarly, only four paintings (a parallel group) in the *Second State* by Geng Jianyi have been finished.³⁸

In 1987 and 1988, Geng Jianyi also created several game-based works, to structure an alternative relationship between the people who were involved as audience and those involved as part of Geng's work, mostly the viewer and the viewed. One of these, from 1987, is called *Tap Water Factory: A Mutually Voyeuristic Installation*. In a classroom, Geng built a walled space with frames around cuts in the walls, and invited the audience to participate as both the viewers and those who are viewed. Those people looking in from outside were identified as the audience, who looked upon an exhibition with many subjects derived from the idea of Hell framed in the Western classical manner. The people looking out from inside were framed as individual portraits and thus became part of the “paintings.” The title implied that the flow between insiders and outsiders might be a metaphor of the cycle of water moving in a water work. And the changing position of each person from outsider to insider demonstrated an alternative space, where the subject-object relationship, encompassed by traditional modes of spectatorship, was questioned.

In 1988, as the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition was being organized for the National Art Museum of China, Geng co-opted curatorial authority from the organizing committee by sending invitations to some one hundred artists, requesting biographical information and deliberately misrepresenting himself as an organizer of the show. Most artists filled out the forms, either honestly or cynically, and returned them. Geng then exhibited them as a conceptual artwork entitled *Investigative Forms* (*Diao chabiao*) at a well-attended art conference (which included many of the artists duped by Geng's game). He thereby allowed the public, rather than a panel of judges, to determine the merits of each entry. Some of the artists, such as Huang Yongping and Wu Shanzhuan, gave cynical responses, as seen in the translations of their completed information forms.

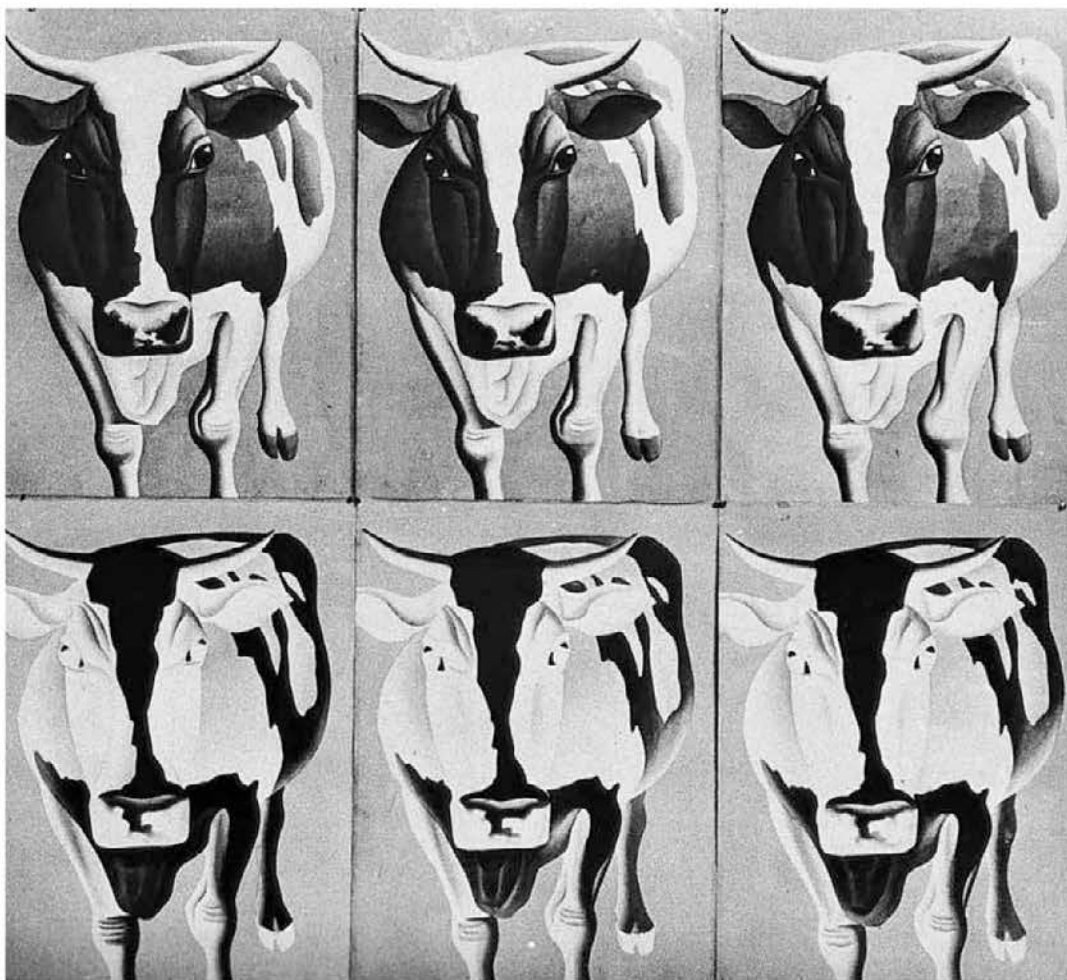


Figure 7.33

Song Ling, *Meaningless Choice No. 1*, 1987.

Figure 7.34

Geng Jianyi, *Tap Water Factory: A Mutually Voyeuristic Installation*, 1987.



In the early 1990s, Geng Jianyi's investigation of the relationships between artworks, artists, and the public in conventional exhibition spaces changed direction as the Chinese social structure was changing. He began to pay attention to broader and more complicated relationships, not only between people and art objects but also between people and the social system, as those relationships were manifested in art institutions. A newly cynical approach might be indicated in a statement Geng wrote in 1991:

I used to think that a completed artwork was like the completed act of taking a piss: when it's finished it's finished—you don't go carrying the contents of the chamber pot around with you. But now things are different, you can't just take a piss whenever you like anymore and be done with it. There are special bathrooms, akin to museums and art galleries, who want to expose you in your most basic acts. And doesn't everybody now accept this situation as normal? The people going in for a look are all very interested, comparing who is big and who is small. How is it that I was born in this age of institutions? And how is it that I want to be proclaimed the champ? It's really a shame.³⁹

This shift, from the conceptual focus of his early work of the '80s to the investigation of alienation produced by materialism among metropolitan people, can be found in many of Geng's performance/installation projects of the 1990s. For instance, in 1994, his *Reasonable Relationship* was done in connection with a group project, *November 26 as a Reason* (*Shiyi yue ershilv ri zuowei liyou*), which required that the participants create a work dealing with the events taking place on that specific day. *Reasonable Relationship* is a record of a performance process, in which Geng hired a woman he met on the streets of Hangzhou, his hometown, to "observe the streets of Shanghai." He signed a contract with her detailing her duties and salary. The woman was to report the things she saw, and the people she communicated with, by submitting physical evidence such as photos, tickets, receipts, and the like. Through the work, Geng wanted to reveal the reality of people's urban lives, which could only be demonstrated by material evidence: he believed that people could not communicate with each other in a nonutilitarian way except through contract.⁴⁰

| | | | | | | | | |
|--|--|---|-----------------------|---|------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Family name | Present name | Huang Yongping | Sex | Male | Family origin | Still has to be explained | P H O T O | |
| | Former name | There is none | Ethnic origin | Han | Personal social status | not clear | | |
| | Year of birth | 1954 | Month of birth | 2 | Day of birth | 19 | Sign of the Zodiac | neither horse nor donkey |
| | Home of ancestors | | | | | | | |
| | Place of birth | | Xiamen | | Weight at birth | Forgotten | | |
| | Present profession | potentially looking for one | Professional position | not yet determined | History | not clear | | |
| | Salary | living steadily month by month | Other economic income | none | Special abilities | general weakness | | |
| | Present qualification | not clear | Education | University graduate | Academic degree | B.A. | | |
| | Height | shrinking daily | Weight | fluctuating daily | Blood group | O | | |
| | Medical history | still has to be examined | | | | Present state of health, chronic | not clear | |
| | State of consciousness | very good | | | | | | |
| | Membership in clubs and organizations | in no organization | | What or who has a special influence on you? | | almost nothing | | |
| | Favourite plant | Plant | Favourite animal | | It's | Favourite person | Actual | |
| | Mental status, relationships and manner of members of family, attitude to work | still has to be examined | | | | | | |
| | At what time, at which place, for what reason have you received which kind of praise or blame? | neither praise nor blame | | | | | | |
| | Way of life and ideological tendencies | Way of life is not yet established; there is almost no ideological tendency | | | | | | |
| BRIEF CURRICULUM VITAE | | | | | | | | |
| From when (Month/Year) until when (Month/Year) | | In which place, in which unit | | Which specific work done | | Witness | | |
| 1975 - 1978 | | Suburb of Xiamen | | Farm labour and diverse other activities | | Geng Jianyi | | |
| 1978 - 1982 | | Art College Zhejiang | | Student and teacher | | Geng Jianyi | | |
| 1982 - 1988 | | Tongwen-Highland School, Xiamen | | Teacher and police officer | | Geng Jianyi | | |
| | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |

Figure 7.35

Geng Jianyi, *Investigative Forms—Huang Yongping, 1988.*

| | | | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------|-------|------|
| 姓名 | 黄永砦 | 性别 | 男 | 家庭出身 | 待调查 |
| 曾用名 | 没有 | 民族 | 汉 | 本人成份 | 不明 |
| 出生年月 | 1954年2月19日 | 属相 | 非驴非马 | | |
| 原籍 | 泉州 | | | | |
| 出生地 | 厦门 | 出生时体重 | 忘了 | | |
| 现在职业 | 正在寻找 | 职务 | 未评 | 爱好 | 不明确 |
| 工资情况 | 每月在不断涨和其他经济来源 | 没有 | 专长 | 偏短 | |
| 现在文化程度 | 尚不清楚 | 学历 | 本科 | 学位 | 文学学士 |
| 身高 | 每天在减少 | 体重 | 每天在浮动 | 血型 | D |
| 病史 | 待查 | | | 现在身体 | 不明 |
| 恢复情况 | 很好 | | | 健康情况 | |
| 参加组织团体情况 | 没有 | 对你有重要影响的人和事 | 几乎没有 | | |
| 最喜爱的植物 | 植物 | 最喜爱的动物 | 人 | 最喜爱的人 | 动物 |
| 庭家人口情况 关系、姓名、职业思想倾向 | 待查 | | | | |
| 何时何地因何原因受过何种奖励或处分 | 没有 | | | | |
| 生活方式和思想倾向 | 生活方式还未确定, 几乎没有思想倾向 | | | | |

| 本人简历 | | | |
|-------------|--------|--------|-----|
| 何年何月至何年何月 | 在何地何单位 | 具体做何工作 | 证明人 |
| 1975 — 1978 | 厦门郊区 | 农活兼杂活 | 耿建翌 |
| 1978 — 1982 | 浙江美术学院 | 学生兼教师 | 耿建翌 |
| 1982 — 1988 | 厦门同文中学 | 教师兼警察 | 耿建翌 |
| | | | |
| | | | |

说明:

一、表格均应用钢笔填写, 字迹要清楚;

二、本表格不做档案材料, 最终由个人保存。

Figure 7.36

Geng Jianyi, *Hiring Contract in Reasonable Relationship*, 1994.

Part Three

The Post-'85 Avant-Garde