

Apartment Art

From the early 1990s, apart from political pop and cynical realism, both short-lived and more sensationalist than avant-garde, there was also a low-key avant-garde that involved a retreat from the public sphere. It came in two types, apartment art and maximalism, which shared a common philosophy and strategy in the practice of contemporary art. Neither apartment art nor maximalism suddenly emerged in the 1990s; both can be traced back to the '70s and '80s. It was in the 1990s, however, that the two types of the low-key avant-garde began to map the large ground of the neo-Chinese *guannian* (idea) art. Some of the artists of these two trends were old *guannian* artists, such as Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, and Wang Luyan, but most of them, like Song Dong, Wang Jin, and Zhuang Huan, belonged to the younger generation.

The neo-*guannian* art of Chinese avant-garde artists had been forced to abandon the avant-garde myth, the innocence, and even the naiveté that had been adopted by the '85 Movement. They were no longer interested in "revolution in art." Instead, apartment art and maximalism pragmatically addressed changing close relationships between themselves and their environment. The media and language used by the new generation, however, were derived from their close investigation of their surroundings. The *guannian* artists of the 1980s elaborated their concepts of an anti-art project by focusing on the revolution in ideas itself, such as in Huang Yongping's randomness, Wu Shanzhuan's *chizi*, Xu Bing's labor-intensive work, and the New Mark Group's tactile art. The expectation of these artists was that their ideas would be understood by the audience or viewers, and that the objects created were simply byproducts. This communication on

the conceptual level gives us a better sense of the intellectual life of the 1980s. The art of the 1980s can be partially understood as part of a project of dematerializing art-making.

On the other hand, the apartment art and maximalism of the 1990s had moved on toward a totally different approach to materialization, not in the sense of commodity exchange but of the communicated relations between artists and things, which valued the subject matter over the concept or idea. Subjects were often taken from daily life. The discovery of a new idea or concept remained secondary to the work of engaging a new *cailiao*, or substance. The post-'85 avant-garde became disenchanted by the endless game of the abstract logical elaboration of the "revolution in ideas." For them, the idea of something original did not come from thinking but from touching daily materials, which made it possible for them to make art in a strictly controlled environment.

Apartment art and maximalism focused on the observable and tangible. Furthermore, the physical context, the location and relocation of an object, became an important part of their conception. To explore the significance of a specific object in a specific environmental context, rather than its significance in relation to artistic historical and aesthetic references, was the fundamental approach of apartment art and maximalism in the early 1990s. The idea of location and replacement also differentiated them from Western conceptual art.

Apartment Art: Shelter of a Dream

"Apartment art" (*gongyu yishu*) is a term I coined to summarize a very important phenomenon in

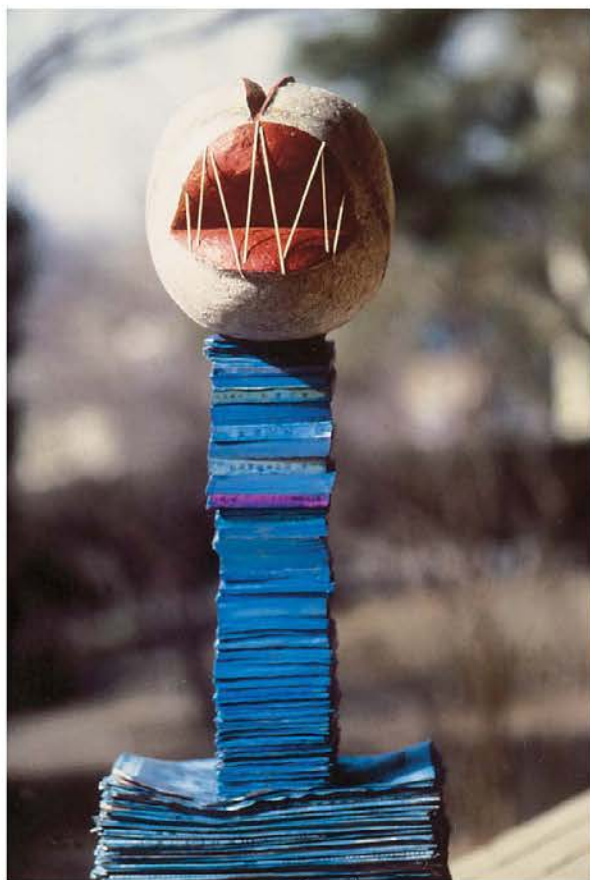


Figure 9.1
Wu Shaoxiang, *Untitled*, 1986.

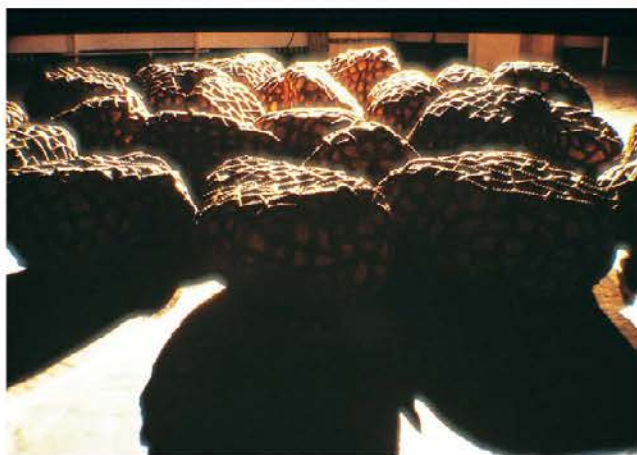


Figure 9.2
Sui Jianguo, *The Earth Painting*, 1992–1994.

Chinese contemporary art of the past three or four decades.¹ “Apartment,” or *gongyu* in Chinese, literally means “government-owned residential complex,” or simply “public house.” It was true that all the residential spaces, whether apartment buildings or courtyards, were physically as well as symbolically “public space” from Mao’s period to the middle 1990s, when residential housing began to be commercialized. From the 1970s to the 1990s, a number of Chinese artists pursued their own private work space within the public residential complexes. Therefore, apartment art, as a mode of existence of underground, experimental, and avant-garde art, shows the distinct social space of contemporary art in China. In the context of Chinese contemporary art, apartment art is one of the most important ways in which avant-garde artists have committed themselves to the creation of critical and radical contemporary artworks throughout the last three decades.

Rather than as an ordinary alternative space for exhibitions, “apartment” must be thought of as a way of surviving for avant-garde art. It is a historical phenomenon, and its development itself is a history of Chinese avant-garde art. For instance, we can draw a line that begins with 1970s amateur avant-garde activity, moving to some self-organized groups in the second half of the 1980s, then finally to the 1990s peak of apartment art. A few years after I coined the term, I found that there was also an “apartment art” in the Soviet Union in the early 1970s. There are many similarities in terms of certain ideological confrontations. The fundamental difference, however, is that the Soviet movement was about creating an alternative space; its art materials and content all related to contemporary public (political) issues. The Chinese movement, however, involved personal and family materials and individual meditation. Its political and public implications were carried by its “totality,” its space of daily life and neighborhood surroundings, the artists’ (many times a couple’s) personal daily life, represented by a number of personal items.

The space of Chinese apartment art was both personal and social. Its sponsorship came only from itself, not from any official institution or gallery space. It was a completely independent, spontaneous form of art activity. Apartment art therefore has also

been defined as a unique social space that functioned as studio, salon, and exhibition space.

In the 1970s, some young artists, distant from official political art, had periodically gathered together and exhibited works of a modern art style in their personal “strongholds”—family apartments. This was an activity of the No Name group, for example. After the Cultural Revolution, from the late 1970s to the middle 1980s, modern art started to enter into official art galleries. However, some works of radical or avant-garde styles still could not be exhibited openly. Therefore, some young artists continued to exhibit their works in apartments, especially works in abstract and expressionist forms. During this period, on the one hand, apartment art adopted a gesture of academic and political noncooperation; on the other hand, it continued to explore the modern artistic approach of “art for art’s sake.” As discussed in chapter 2, apartment art had had very close interactive relations with the amateur movement among the youth of the late 1970s, which explored poems, photography, and so on. At the same time, they actively took part in political activities such as the “Democracy Wall” in Xidan.

The early 1980s saw a political clampdown with the campaign called Anti-Spiritual Pollution, which mostly targeted Western modernism and abstract art. Apartments thus became a shelter for abstract art. Group shows and gatherings took place in artists’ homes, or quite often in foreign friends’ apartments, which were supposed to be safer than those of Chinese artists during this period.²

In this stage, apartment art activity was perhaps the first channel for civilian cultural exchange. For instance, Zhang Wei and Li Shan, artists, frequently hosted gatherings and shows in their home. Guests included many Western friends, including Mr. and Mrs. Hans Müller (Swiss ambassador and art collector), Bernardo Bertolucci (an Italian director), Franco Giovale (a producer), Ulrike Koch (now a German director of documentaries), Michael Murray (a professor in the Department of Philosophy at Vassar College in the United States), Jochen Note, Dieter Honisch (director of the New National Gallery in Berlin, Germany), and so on.

One of the most sensational events involved a visit by Robert Rauschenberg, which reveals a



Figure 9.3
Xinming Hutong, Zhang Wei, and Zhu Jinshi in Unit 1, Room 15, in Building No. 1, in 1982. Photograph provided by Li Shan.



Figure 9.4
Xinming Hutong, Franco Giovale’s mother, Franco Giovale, Zhang Wei, and Li Shan in Unit 1, Room 15, in Building No. 1, in 1983. Photograph provided by Li Shan.

phenomenon of contextual misunderstanding in China in this period. At the end of 1985, the famous pop artist came to China and held large-scale exhibitions in Beijing and Lhasa. This was one of the most astonishing events in contemporary Chinese art history, and his exhibitions profoundly influenced the '85 Movement in many aspects. In the exhibition hall, a video kept screening which narrated that Rauschenberg had won prizes and undertaken artistic creations in various countries, as well as showing his representative works from different periods. This information in company with his gigantic collages had a tremendous impact on Chinese audiences, promoting a flourishing of pop in Chinese art circles.

Rauschenberg's radical contemporary art form, however, was difficult for officials to accept, even though the exhibit was arranged through official channels. The Chinese Artists Association, the top official authority in the Chinese art world, hosted his visit, but *Meishu*, the official journal of the Chinese Artists Association, only published a short paragraph about the exhibition after it had already taken place.³

During his exhibition in Beijing, Rauschenberg visited a group show organized by American journalist He Mole in his home in the diplomatic compound in Beijing. It featured abstract artworks by seven artists from the amateur avant-garde (Zhang Wei, Zhu Jinshi, Ma Kelu, Wang Luyan, Qin Yufen, Gu Dexin, and Feng Guodong), and was therefore named the "Seven-Man Exhibition."⁴

On the opening day of the apartment show, Rauschenberg refused the invitation of the Chinese Artists Association to visit the China Central Academy of Fine Art; instead he came to the apartment art exhibition. He appreciated some works from the show, especially Wang Luyan's prints. But, in general, he considered these abstract paintings out-of-date. This made the dialogue between the Chinese avant-garde and Rauschenberg awkward. Then, when Rauschenberg discussed his solo exhibition in Beijing with the Chinese artists, the response was not very positive. Suddenly, the conversation became tit-for-tat, and tensions built up.⁵ Brought up in a closed environment, these young artists possessed completely different backgrounds and artistic ideas from those of Rauschenberg; while he judged the



Figure 9.5

Robert Rauschenberg visiting an apartment art exhibition, 1985.

apartment abstract art as out of fashion, the Chinese artists considered it to be very radical. This difference of context reveals the interesting dislocation of modernity in the global sense.

In the late 1980s, avant-garde art in China made a strong impact on public space, and apartment art was no longer considered the main mode of artistic creation, exhibition, and communication. Various self-organized avant-garde groups emerged nationwide around the mid-1980s and took up the salon typology of the apartment of the 1970s. The avant-garde groups of the '85 Movement no longer name themselves *huahui*, or "painting societies," as had the groups of the 1970s, but rather *qunti* (collective bodies), and they assumed more of the functions of a direct challenge to society. Most other avant-garde groups had already become dissatisfied with exhibiting their art concepts and works in private spaces, so they moved into public art galleries. The typical example is the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition of 1989, which attempted to educate a public audience with various types of contemporary artworks spread over all three floors in the National Art Museum of China. However, some artists continued to stay on the outside, especially those who lived in marginal areas. For example, in Datong, Shanxi province, the artists led by Zhang Shengquan continued to create art and hold small exhibitions in personal spaces. In Beijing, Wang Luyan and Gu Dexin organized the New Mark Group (which became the Analysis Group after Chen Shaoping joined). They held activities at home, and communicated with other artists and critics. In the late 1980s, the artists of apartment art not only surpassed the early salon (*huahui*) and modernist painting styles, and thereby entered into a new phase of *guannian* art, but also intended their artworks as a response to mainstream avant-garde art. In other words, the apartment art of this period shared a similar public interest with the avant-garde groups of that time.

Artistically, from 1988 Zhang Shengquan in Datong began to use his own body as the major language in his performance art, which can be seen as the initiation of a strain of performance art by Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and others from the Beijing East Village of the early 1990s (a nickname for an artists' district in Dashanzi, an eastern suburb of

Beijing, alluding to New York's East Village). Zhang Shengquan's is an extreme example of apartment art. In 1992, he began the work of deconstructing his own self, first by refusing contact with anyone, even his family. He isolated himself in his room and only communicated with two close friends, Ren Xiaoying and Zhu Yanguang. Sometimes they displayed their works in the family courtyard.⁶ Zhang wrote his notes on philosophy, life, and art as well as numerous poems in the remote northwestern town. Since nobody could understand him, the only thing he felt he could do was to continue with his meditation and suffering.

He finally committed suicide on January 1, 2000, in his home, giving up his life to make his last work of performance art. He left a sentence on the wall of his room, which read: "The last question remains to art, namely whether an artist should remain alive, especially when he uses art to serve himself [*weiziji suoyong*]. With this situation, art therefore remains meaningless." He thus believed that "once we understand the boundary between the two worlds, reality and art, we can make art totally isolated from the human world. I believe there is a spiritual entity beyond my vision and physical body. I can reach it by incorporating it into my artwork."⁷ Zhang's suicide resembled a religious desire to transcend the individual body, to reach the other world. Sadly, this powerful behavior is quickly buried by society's materialist desires.

Wang Luyan's New Mark Group could also be considered as the inception of Beijing apartment art in the late 1980s, in the terms of the self-criticism of the avant-garde mainstream, which I discussed in chapter 8.

In the 1990s, apartment art emerged under intensive political oppression. These artists could not gain support from official public spaces, so they were forced to retreat to their personal spaces. On the other hand, Chinese avant-garde art moved toward international recognition, receiving attention from the European and American markets and media, which focused on political pop and cynical realism. From the background of post-Cold War international politics and the subsequent appearance of a global market ecology, this short-lived avant-garde soon abandoned its critical tone and rapidly



Figure 9.6

Zhang Shengquan, sketch for *Sweeping the Floor*, 1996.

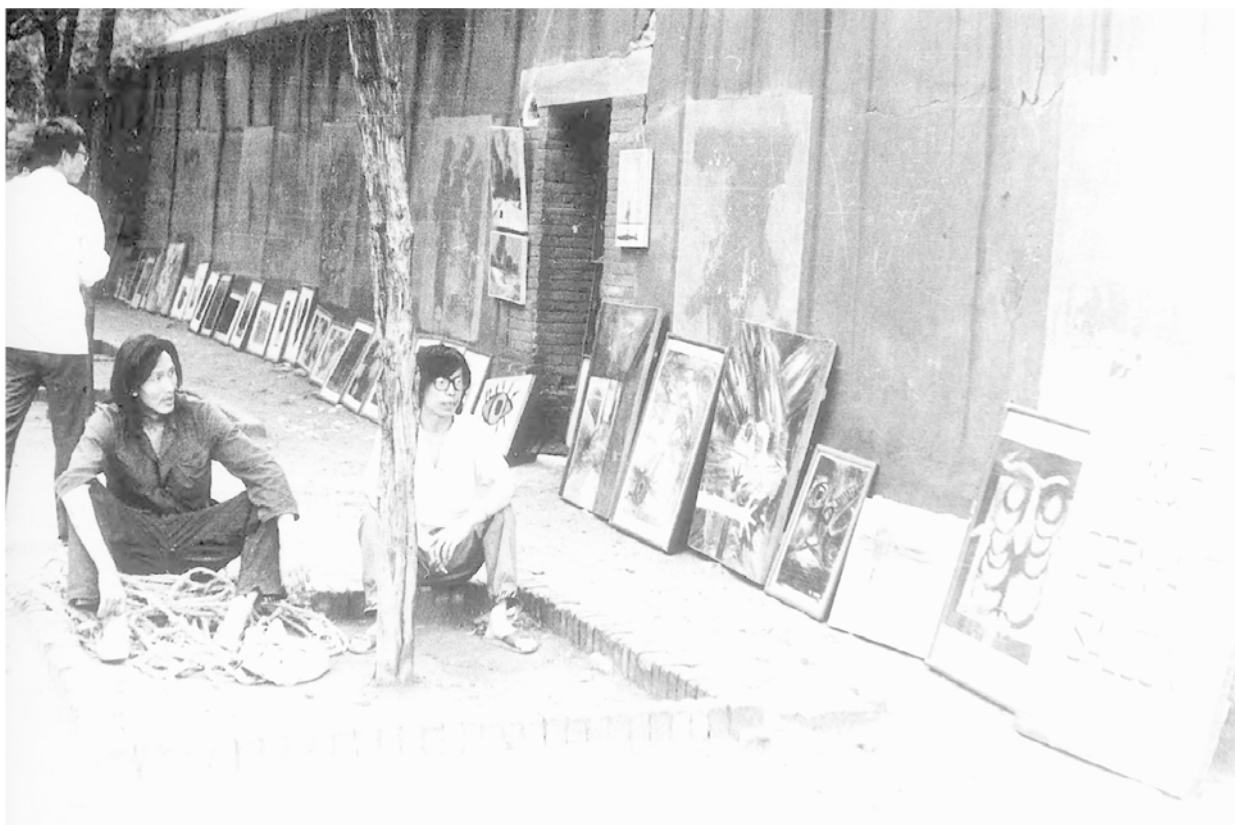


Figure 9.7
Zhang Shengquan with his friend Zhu Yanguang and others on the site of the home exhibition, 1987.



Figure 9.8
The New Mark Group (Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping, and Gu Dexin) in 1990.

turned toward vulgarism and opportunism—making speculative mass productions between political kitsch and commercial kitsch. Through the silent act of retreating from both public and market space to private surroundings, the apartment art of the 1990s, on the contrary, created unexhibitable and unsellable small-scale installation or *fang an* (project-on-paper) works. In its silence, apartment art in the 1990s thus became not only an antagonist action against society, but an internal critic of avant-garde art itself, protecting it from corrosion and corruption. In this sense, 1990s apartment art ultimately is not about home or apartment, but rather a critique of social spaces and art institutions.

From the late 1990s, the emergence of flocks of art districts and galleries ended apartment art. Both the marginal critical gestures and the deliberately inconspicuous anti-kitsch forms became meaningless when engulfed by ubiquitous auctions, markets, and exhibitions. Subsequently, avant-garde art also ceased.

Artists' Villages: Pop and Performance Art

In the early 1990s, as avant-garde art was denied access to official exhibition space and was disregarded by mass culture, it was forced to retreat. Some participants moved together to artists' villages and some began to make apartment art, which developed from the *guannian* art of the '85 Movement. Unlike the artist collectives involved in the '85 Movement, avant-garde artists from this period, whether by their own choice or not, showed no interest in public engagement or understanding. Their audiences were typically composed of members of the avant-garde art circle, and at times the shows were only attended by a few photographers. Meanwhile, the sudden increase in invitations to participate in overseas exhibitions and the absence of opportunities in China pushed the artists to let go of their desire to win over the public.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the *yishucun* or artists' village, also called a *huajiacun* or painters' village, became a gathering place. (The two names were both widely used, with no significant difference, though *huajiacun* is more common especially for those from outside the art world.) Located in the area between city and suburb known as *chengxiang jiehe*

bu, its cheap rent and relatively free environment began to attract artists, who were nicknamed *mangliu* (jobless migrants). In the beginning, namely in the 1980s, these were mostly self-educated, but later those who had graduated from art academies joined the villages as well. They chose to make a living as independent artists outside of the system in order to maintain their independent thinking, and also because of their lack of interest in the public responsibility of art. They were professional artists. After June 4, 1989, the political and economic climate prompted the abrupt growth of this "jobless migrant" phenomenon. From 1990, some avant-garde artists, such as Ding Fang, Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Yang Shaobin, and Xu Yihui, most of whom were active in the cynical realist group, along with some poets, started to settle in artists' villages, mostly in Yuanmingyuan (the Old Summer Palace) in Beijing.⁸ Later, most of them moved to Songzhuang in the eastern suburbs.

The majority of the artists from the '85 Movement had full-time jobs working for state-controlled universities, middle schools, or local cultural institutions. In other words, they were "amateur" in the sense that they were not full-time artists. Their work was not a byproduct of their regular jobs but rather a product of intellectual interest.

In the early 1990s, however, the *huajiacun* became one of the bases for the post-'85 avant-garde, in particular for pop and cynical art as well as performance art. These two groups lived in different villages: one in Songzhuang, where Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, and Liu Wei relocated, and the other in Dashanzi, or Beijing East Village, where the most active performance artists, such as Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Fadong, Zhu Ming, and Cang Xin, settled in 1992.

This division, however, is very rough. In fact, the types of artists in the villages were very diverse. Many of them made commercial art, following the trends of pop and the cynical realism. The beginning of the artists' village can be traced back to the mid-1980s, possibly as early as 1984, when some *mangliu* (jobless migrant) painters moved into Fuyuanmen village, Guajiatun, and other spots in Yuanmingyuan. They painted ink wash, abstract, and modernist works that catered to the preferences of foreign art markets



Figure 9.9

Artists in Yuanmingyuan village of Beijing, 1995.

Photograph provided by Yang Wei.

through ambassadors or foreign visitors. They existed on the periphery of the avant-garde of the 1980s.⁹ Among them, the most well known are Zhang Dali, Mou Sen, A Xian, and Zheng Lianjie.

An artists' village in the first half of the 1990s was a mixture of avant-garde practice and consumerism. There were two types of consumerism. One group made art to earn a living and get rich quickly; the other suffered, able only to consume their own things, including their own body. The first type committed themselves to making fashionable paintings, mostly in the avant-garde cynical realist and pop styles, for the market. The other group consisted of the performance and conceptual artists led by Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Fadong, and the others who lived in Dashanzi. In chapter 8, I

discussed the cynical and pop phenomenon, which has become one of the major commercial sources in contemporary Chinese art. The second type seemed to fit the notion of "privacy" in Chinese apartment art. The majority of this type, namely the Dashanzi village group, engaged in consuming their own body, a performance that involved self-abuse and self-torture in response to the combined political and commercial environment. In a society increasingly directed to the ownership of commodities, the avant-garde artists in this circle felt there was nothing that they could "own" but their own bodies. Artists of the 1990s, such as Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Fadong, Cang Xin, Zhu Ming, and He Yunchang, retreated from the public to reclaim their bodies by enduring various forms of self-inflicted injury.



Figure 9.10

Beijing East Village in 1993, photographed by Rong Rong.

It was not until the early 1990s that Chinese performance artists began to use their bodies to convey a deeply personal experience instead of a social or cultural concern. When performance art first emerged in China, in the mid-1980s, it shared the goals of its Western counterpart of the 1960s: to break down conventional ideas about art.¹⁰ For instance, the *First Experimental Exhibition*, organized by a group of artists from Guangzhou, consisted of dance, music, painting, sculpture, and video. However, in spite of this early effort to create a truly multidisciplinary approach or a crossbreeding of the arts, it never fully took hold as a trend in China.

In the early stages, there were key distinctions between Western performance art and body art in the 1960s, although both are commonly referred to as performance art. Performance art drew on many disciplines and media including literature, poetry, theater, music, dance, architecture, and painting, as well as video and film. On the other hand, body art, which first emerged in the early 1960s along with conceptual art, was based on the notion that the artist's body was an artist's primary material. Body art commonly addressed issues related to social and political polemics or violence and aggression. The works often presented the artist as a shaman or explored the idea of the artist's body as an aesthetic object. In this way, body art was a conceptual pursuit guided by continental philosophy, in particular existentialism.¹¹

The social sentiment of Chinese performance art was similar to body art in its exploration of the suppressed human soul. Chinese performance art of the last two decades has, at times, been playful in spirit, with performances taking place in the public sphere, while other works have involved self-inflicted pain or ritualistic acts of endurance. While contemporary Chinese performance art is similar to that of the body art of the early 1960s, Chinese performance artists have often considered their bodies not as aesthetic objects to be used in their art production, but rather as ritual bodies associated not only with contemporary social circumstance but also with larger philosophical issues about what it means to be human.

During transitional periods in China, performance art has acted out in particularly violent

ways to capture the public's attention. Perhaps the public's response to performance art mirrors a specific cultural understanding of performance art in China. The Chinese term for performance art is *xingwei yishu*, which means, roughly, "behavior art." Behavior not only denotes the physical actions of an individual but also connotes the ways in which an individual expresses him or herself within a community or social structure. This variation in language and cultural perspective may have its roots in a Confucian tradition, as well as in Mao's ideology of collectivism.

In both traditions there is no such thing as a strictly individual behavior. All individual behavior is social, and all behavior reflects some type of social relationship. It is this particular cultural context that gives the body more symbolic and subjective, rather than aesthetic and objective, qualities in Chinese performance art. It is also this understanding of the human body that mystifies the spiritual self and devalues the physical body. For instance, in the second century B.C. the Confucian scholar Dong Zhuongshu formed his theory called *tianren ganying*, which matches each part of human anatomy with a component of the universe.

Consuming Own Body

This social and cultural context is always present, regardless of an individual performance artist's intention. Since performance art has always had such a strong ability to emotionally impact an audience, it has never been permitted in China. It is precisely this taboo that has effectively encouraged artists to choose performance art as one of the most powerful ways to express their social critiques. It was not until the early 1990s, however, that Chinese apartment artists began to realize that due to the external pressures of both political circumstances and a booming consumer society, they owned nothing except their own privacy, including their own bodies. The body was the only unrestricted medium for the expression of personal freedom. They could arbitrarily punish, sell, and injure their own bodies, and, in doing so, test their own powers of endurance. Endurance, in this way, evolved into another form of free enjoyment. In the early 1990s, performance art could only be realized

in private spaces. The performance art of this period seems to trace a trajectory from shocking the viewer to testing the viewer's humanity.

In the Beijing East Village, artists such as Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Fadong, Cang Xin, Zhu Ming, and He Yunchang created a series of performance works in their homes and in the area around their homes, many of which involved sex, gender, and personal suffering. They slowly began to shrug off the influence of the performance art of the 1980s and turned toward their own bodily languages, emphasizing their ability to express their feelings about life through their own limited bodies and their lived relationship with their surroundings. They abandoned the emphasis that the performance art of the 1980s had placed on the event. That type of consciousness had more often than not sought to use the performance as a catalyst that would incite some kind of public disturbance. The performance artists of the Beijing East Village, on the contrary, were more interested in their own internal conflicts and in exploring physical and emotional capacities for endurance.

The performance artists of the 1980s, more often than not, had thought of themselves as martyrs and proselytizers. The artists of the Beijing East Village, however, thought of themselves as average members of society, examining the experiences of daily life. For instance, Zhang Huan said in his essay "A Personal Account of *Twelve Square Meters*": "What I am actually most interested in are people at their most ordinary, during typical daily moments when they are most prone to being overlooked. This is also what constitutes the original material for when I create, such as, when we are sitting on the couch talking, smoking, in bed resting, going to work every day, eating, shitting, and so on. In these daily activities we find the nearest thing to what humanity is, the most essential human thing—the question of the human spirit, the quest to discover how we relate to the environment we exist in." In his 1994 piece *Twelve Square Meters*, Zhang sat in a public toilet in the village for one hour, naked and covered with honey to attract flies. The artist challenged the certainty of his own existence through acts of endurance in which he underwent physical and mental pain. This process not only represented the power of individual experience,

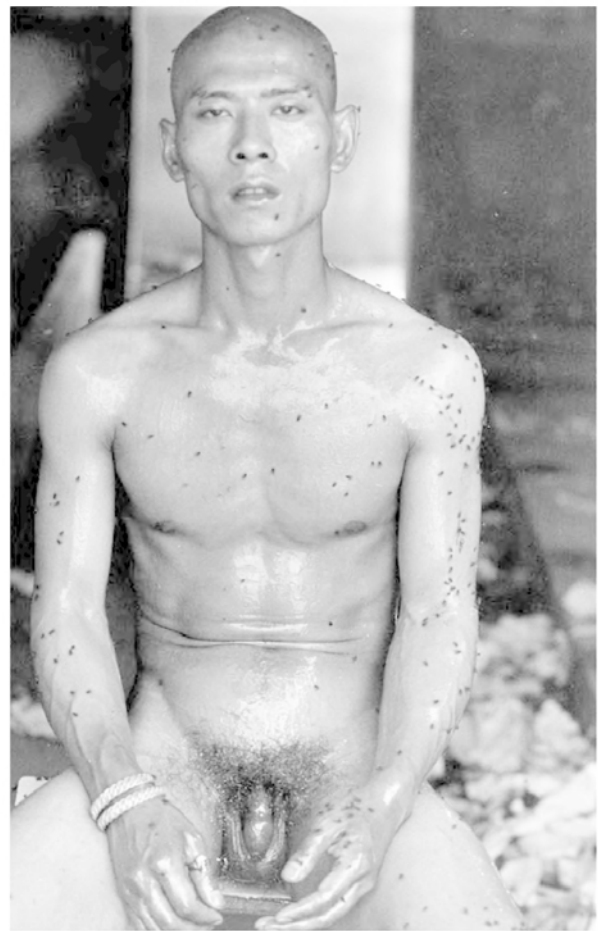


Figure 9.11

Zhang Huan, *Twelve Square Meters*, 1994.



but also manifested how people living in even the most squalid of environments still maintain human dignity. This sort of dignity of the ordinary person has been sought after continuously throughout post-Cultural Revolution Chinese society, and yet it is also continuously lost.¹²

Ma Liuming used his girlish facial features and male body to create a confusingly gendered image in his performance works. People pointed out that his body had “hermaphroditic” characteristics, but the goal of his performance was not to challenge popular debates about gender and cultural identity. For Ma, the reason for his use of his body in performance works was very simple: it was purely because of his distinct physical characteristics. When he was young, Ma Liuming’s classmates always called him a girl. This reaction pushed him to display the uniqueness of his body to everyone.

Zhu Fadong and Cang Xin, two major performance artists, also lived in the Beijing East Village in the early 1990s. Their early projects carried implications of self-devaluation. Zhu Fadong moved to Beijing from Kunming, Yunnan province, in 1993. In Kunming, he once walked down the street with a poster taped to his back that read, “This person is for sale, the price is negotiable.” When he moved to Beijing, he continued to “sell” himself by putting advertisements on the street. Once he put up missing person notices (*xunren qishi*). Cang Xin, on the other hand, made thousands of plaster molds of his face and put them on the ground of his courtyard, inviting people to walk on them until they lay in fragments. This destruction of his self-portrait was a declaration of freedom: even if he possessed no other freedom, Cang Xin had the freedom to make other people destroy his own image without violating any law.



Figure 9.12

Guang Tingbo, *Steel: Sweat*, 1981.

Figure 9.13

Ma Liuming, *Fragment: Ma Liuming*, 1993.



Figure 9.14

Zhu Fadong, *Missing Person Notices*, 1993.

Figure 9.15

Cang Xin, *Virus Series: Acme of Commonness*, 1995.



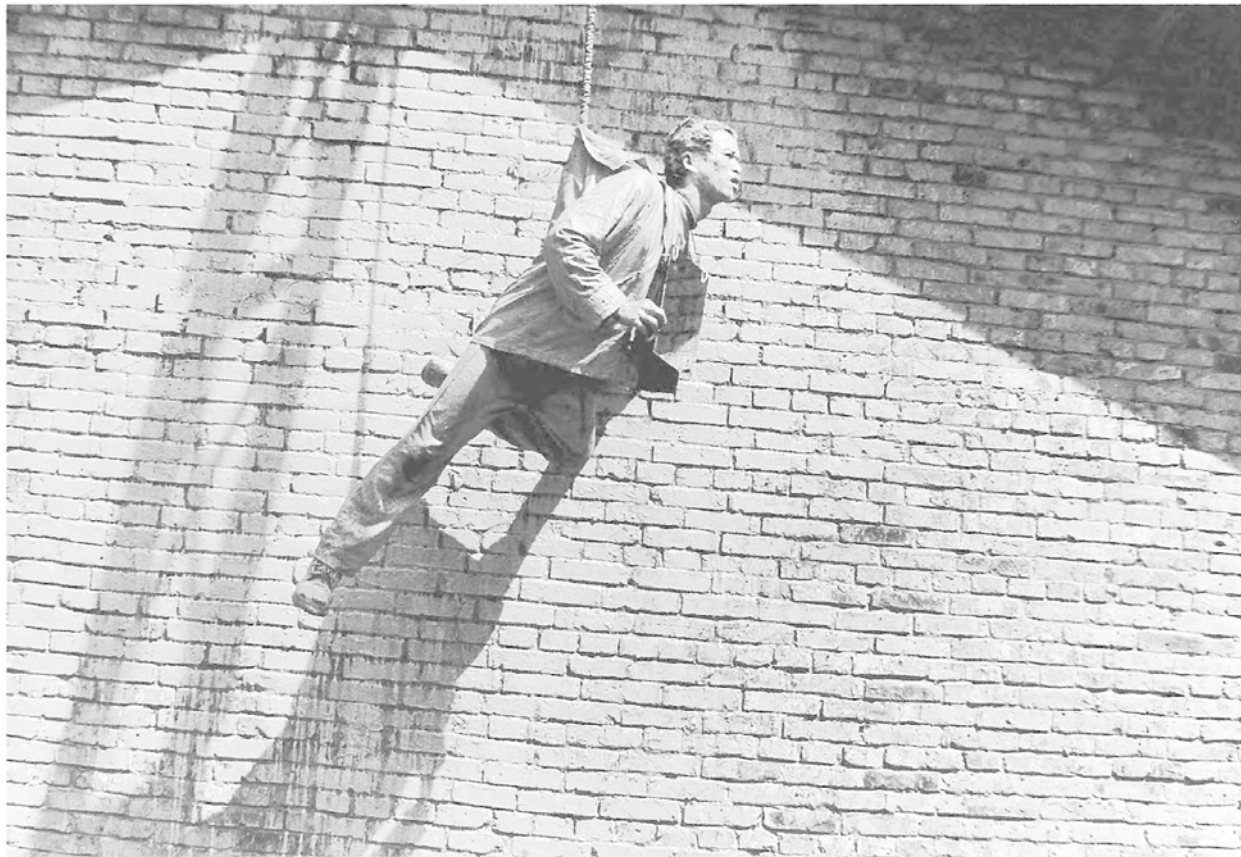


Figure 9.16

He Yunchang, *Golden Sunshine*, 1999.

In contemporary performance art, He Yunchang was perhaps the last artist to focus on his own bodily language. He began his performances in 1997 in his hometown in Yunnan province. His performances concentrated on his body and in some ways were very close to the language of Zhang Huan. Like Zhang, he examined the process of enduring pain. In a 1999 performance, *Golden Sunshine*, he covered himself in yellow oil paint and hung from a roof, painting the wall except where his shadow fell. After ninety minutes, he went into shock and fainted.

In his *Conversation with Water* of 1999, He Yunchang hung his body on a chain block over a river and gashed the river surface with a sword held in his hand. He also lacerated his arm and let his blood run into the river water. He's performances lead us to contemplate the relationship between man and nature. This open space has perhaps nothing to do with privacy and home (apartment). It might, however, imply a certain anxiety about losing

privacy, being homeless, especially for those migrants in artists' villages.

In the history of Chinese art, it has been a tradition to use monumental landscapes as a metaphor for human virtue. This traditional language continued to be applied in contemporary avant-garde art. The difference is that in contemporary art, because of the prohibition of performance by the authorities, artists could either take their home as a site, or go to a mountain or river to have a natural site as a private space to do performance. For instance, a collective performance work called *To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain*, which involved Zhang Huan and eight other artists, presents the mountain as the home of the artists' bodies. Artists and the mountain, trees and grass, can all be read as lost and homeless. Although the "unknown mountain" appears to be much different than the artists, they are all "unknown," naked, primitive, and exposed in the wild.



Figure 9.17

He Yunchang, *Conversation with Water*, 1999.



Figure 9.18

Zhang Huan and others, *To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain*, 1995.

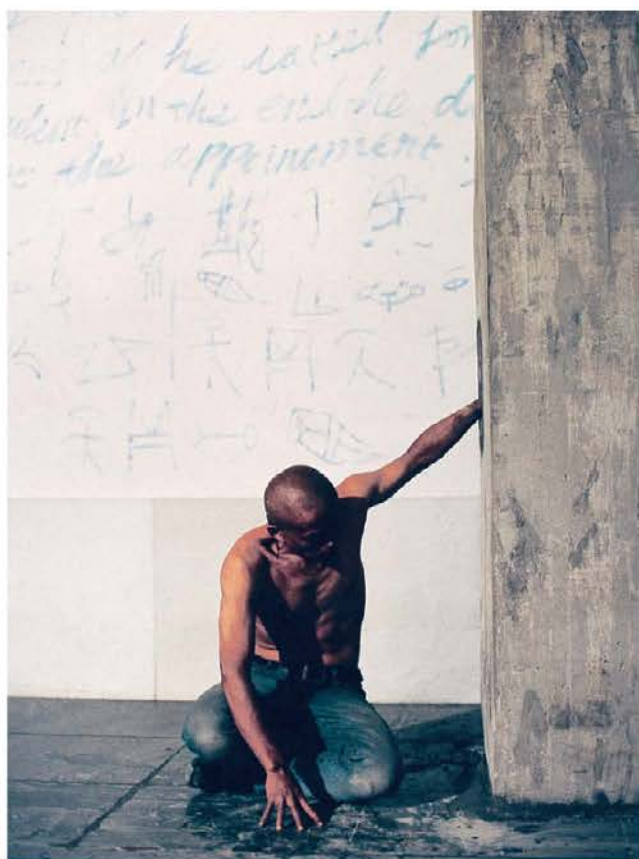


Figure 9.19

He Yunchang, *The Trusting Man Who Drowned While Holding the Column*, 2003.

For He Yunchang's performance entitled *The Trusting Man Who Drowned While Holding the Column*, he cast his arm in a cement pillar and kept it there for twenty-four hours. The title refers to a famous Chinese love story in which Wei Sheng and a girl were to meet under a bridge. The girl did not arrive and a flood came; the boy clasped a pillar of the bridge and stayed until he died. He Yunchang borrowed this love story about faith, and used his fortitude and endurance to reveal the value of human nature. Do the traditional humanistic values of loyalty, honesty, courtesy, wisdom, and faith still make sense in society today?

Zhang Huan and He Yunchang both saw endurance as the priority in their performances; but

while Zhang's performances were given in private spaces in front of an audience, He's endurance was balanced against the environment, making the environment into a component of his performance. For him, without mechanical opposition his endurance would have been meaningless. Therefore, his body language was more symbolic and was meant to serve as a spectacle. His endurance was partially enforced by his surroundings—the concrete wall, the crane, and the river.

Apartment Art Activities in the 1990s

Apartment art in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other places appeared on an even larger scale in the 1990s. Several artist couples who had lived abroad for a long time returned to Beijing, such as Zhu Jinshi and Qin Yufen, Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao, Xu Bing and Cai Jin, and Ai Weiwei and Lu Qing. Furthermore, some couples from Beijing, such as Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, as well as Beijing artists like Wang Peng and Wang Jin, were all involved in apartment art activities. They made their homes the strongholds of personal space, where they created and exhibited a large number of small-scale installations made of cheap materials and embracing the concept of randomness.

Many works had drawn their materials from families and personal living environments, and they could be discarded after exhibition. In Shanghai, a group of artists including Qian Weikang and Shi Yong also created and exhibited various small-scale installation series at home in the early 1990s. In Hangzhou, leading figures from the period of 1985, such as Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, inspired several younger artists to create some apartment works. Apartment artists from different cities had close contacts, and they created some *fang an* or "project-on-paper" apartment artworks printed as "postcards" for communication.

The themes and materials of the apartment art of this period very closely touched on the circumstances and people's feelings about cities. The art of the East Village adopted direct expressions (most of them used body language), and they later made their critique on the social environment through the demonstration of private space and personal substance.



Figure 9.20

Friends meeting in Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen's home, 1994.



Figure 9.21

Bedroom in Song Dong's home with the artwork *Culture Noodles*, 1994.



Figure 9.22

Qian Weikang, *Imitation: White: 36K, Square Meters: 36 cm², Additional Electrical Current: 6V. 5A*, 1993.



Figure 9.23

Shi Yong, *The Site of Sound Amplifying: Echoes in a Private Space*, 1995.

Fang an, or “Projects on Paper”

In Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou, some artists and groups of artists organized exchanges and discussions about art using a loose format, and made works that were not sellable, consisting mainly of writings on particular topics. This kind of exchange was realized not through exhibitions but through publications and distributed photocopies. Such proposals were primarily mechanical and quantitative in nature.

In Beijing, as early as 1990, Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping, and Gu Dexin gathered regularly in Wang Luyan's home to talk about art and launch their apartment art activities. Wang and Gu had already collaborated on the project *Tactile Art* in 1988 (see chapter 7).¹³ After 1989, Wang, Chen, and Gu began to work on the conceptual art series *Analysis*. In this set of works, they followed the same procedures used in mathematics and geometry. They would decide on a plan beforehand, and then each took turns drawing straight lines, circles, and dots according to a set formula. At the end of the calculation, they would have a result that was the extension of logical procedures.

From 1990 to 1995, the New Mark Group (which later changed its name to Analysis Group) made five sets of rules in total, did five sets of analyses or calculations, and bound them into books. The value of *Analysis* was not in the calculation itself, but in the space and form in which it was executed. Their strict group format, combined with their logical, impersonal, and representational calculation process, suggested a rejection of any romantic, sentimental, and subjective forms. These artists maintained that for an individual, the only freedom was one's control over one's own emotions and immediate surroundings.

In 1995, Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping, Wang Youshen, Wang Jianwei, and several other artists edited a collection of art proposals titled *Chinese Contemporary Artists' Work Proposals* (1994). Among them there were a large number of ideas for artworks that were never realized, only remaining on paper as drawings made by artists at home. Subsequently the artists turned this *fang an*, or “project on paper,” into a particular method of art-making. This type of

extremely prescribed, quantitative art proposal can be seen in similar works produced by artists in Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Beijing in the early 1990s. Unlike the members of the Analysis Group, most artists did not join a fixed group. Instead, artists with shared interests would decide on a very specific amount of time or dimensions for a subject. According to his or her own understanding, each artist would come up with a concept and a sketch or photograph of a small-scale installation project, which they would then put together in one publication like postcards. The exhibition space was the post office.

In 1995, a group of artists who lived in Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing, including Geng Jianyi, Chen Yanyin, Jiang Jie, Shi Yong, Kan Xuan, Qian Weikang, Yang Zhenzhong, Zhang Keduan, Wang Qiang, and Zhan Wang, made *fang an* art with the given topic of “45° as a Reason” (*sishiwu du zuowei liyou*). Most works involved materials found in their households, such as doors, windows, TV sets, Chinese herbs, etc. Earlier, most of these same artists had made similar types of works according to the topic “Agree to the Date November 26, 1994 as a Reason.” They went about the given subjects from various directions, such as a specific spatial angle, volume, length of time, date, humidity and temperature, and so on. They maintained a distance from and skepticism toward anything beyond physical proof.

This practice of making art based on mathematical and physical specifications continued through the end of the 1990s. Perhaps the largest *fang an* project was the one called *Wilderness* (*Yesheng*). In 1998, Song Dong and Guo Shirui organized a project (later turned into a publication) titled *Yesheng, 1997 nian jingzhe shi* (*Wilderness: Starting from the day of jingzhe, 1997*), which featured project proposals, photographs, and sketches of installation plans by artists. According to the editors, *Wilderness* was an art event “held in a non-exhibition space, according to a non-exhibition model,” with the participation of twenty-seven artists from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu. This event was sponsored by the Modern Art Center and opened on the day of the *jingzhe* in 1997. (*Jingzhe* literally means “awakening of the insect” and is a designation for March 5 in the Chinese lunar calendar.) The event



Figure 9.24

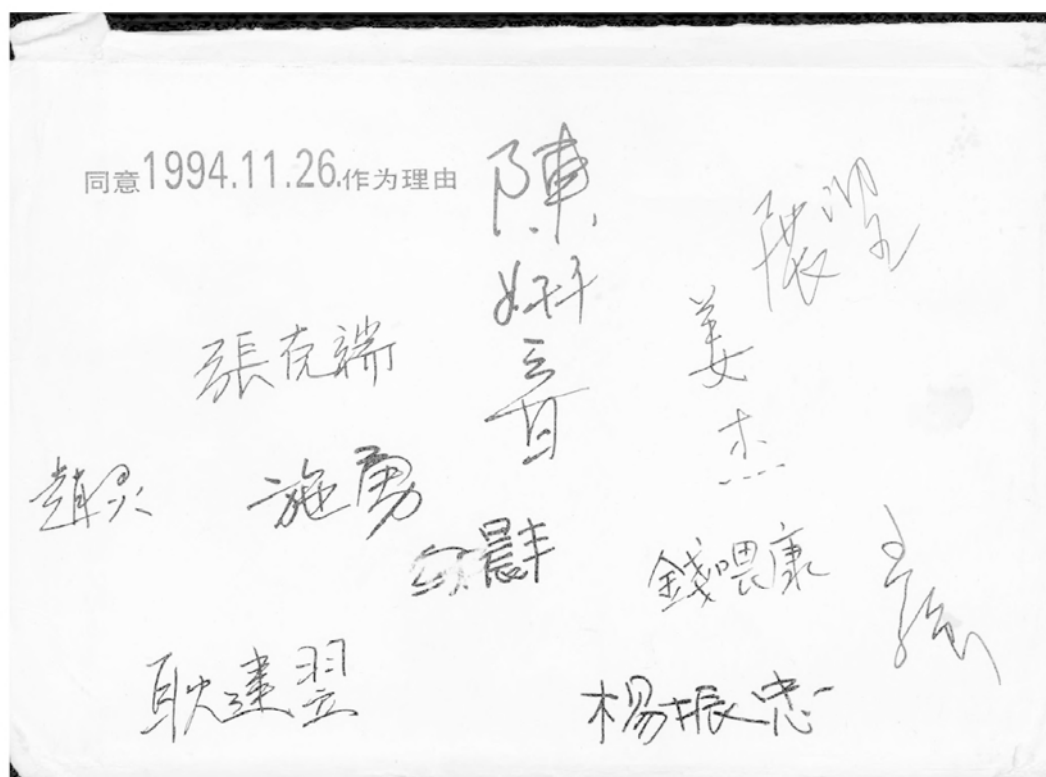
Chen Yanyin, *Wind and Gate, the Visible Gate and Invisible Gate Set Up at 45°*, 1995.

Figure 9.25

Zhang Keduan, Shi Yong, Yang Zhenzhong, Chen Yanyin, and others, proposal/envelope for *Agree to the Date November 26, 1994 as a Reason*, October 1994.

Figure 9.26

Jiang Jie, *A Medical Accident*, created for the project *Agree to the Date November 26, 1994 as a Reason*, 1994.

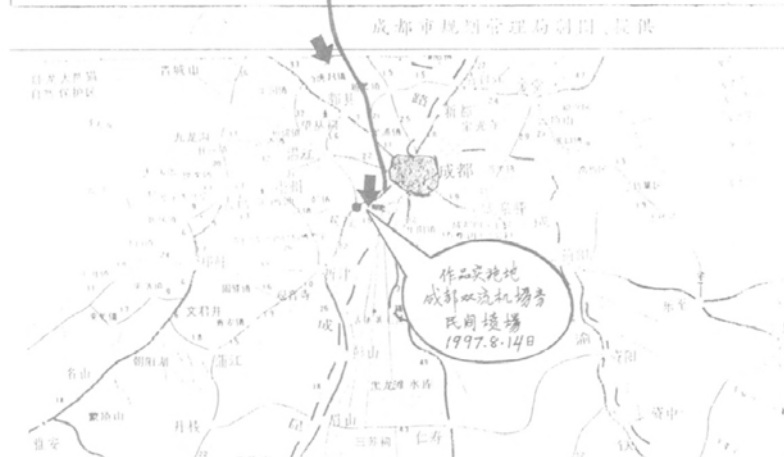
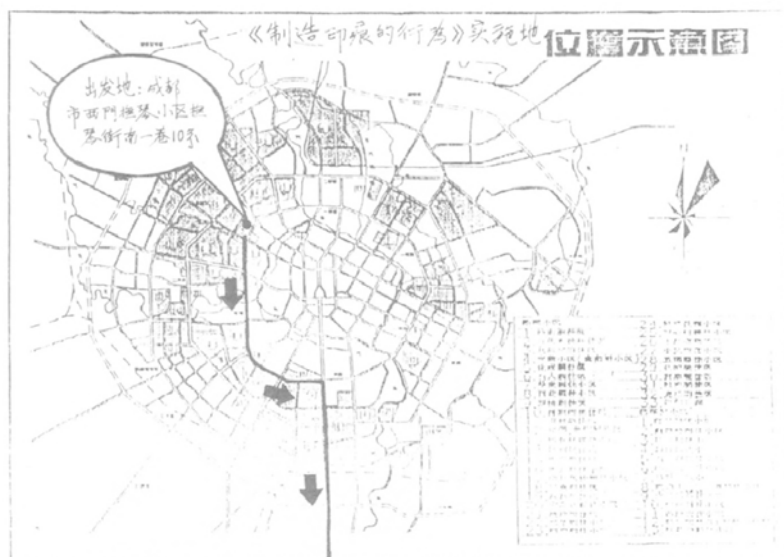


went on for a year, during which time artists from all over the country held discussions concerning a wide range of issues and made proposals especially for the event. Each artist conducted his or her own work spanning a relatively long time, based on his or her particular cultural environment, natural environment, and individual background.¹⁴

This event was no doubt an extreme form of withdrawal, a deconstruction or transcending of ideology. If we interpret it in relation to the artistic climate from 1993 to 1995, *Wilderness* reveals a detachment from any ideological vanity and illusion, as well as from the market craze brought about by political pop and cynical realism. For these artists, to preserve a specific measurement or other concrete attribute was to approach the truth. The destination of their retreat in space was precisely their own living rooms and apartments. In this sense, the most extreme examples would be Qian Weikang and Shi Yong in Shanghai, although Qian did not participate in *Wilderness*.

Qian and Shi organized their joint exhibition "The Two Attitudes toward Image 93" in 1993. Qian Weikang exhibited *To Lift an Object by Five Degrees Brings Out the Volume of the Shadow, Wind Direction: 205 Grams of White*, and *Leaning toward a Pressure Point*. In these works, all the audience could see or were told about were the size of the sand, the level of the water, and the moving speed of the sunlight. All of these elements, even time, could be calculated. Nothing was mentioned about spirituality.

It is fascinating that nearly all of the *fang an* works of those years were conceptualized according to the given subject of a very specific time and place, and characterized by their "documentary" qualities. "A specific spot" and "a fixed quantity" were symbolic of normality and everyday life, and were therefore the easiest platforms for exchange and conversation. *Fang an* art's methodology was parallel to the documentary approach in 1990s experimental film and photography, since it was the easiest way to approach life. The publication of these "proposals based on assigned topics" was the equivalent of a display in an art space. Their function was to communicate but also to represent the creative process. Most inventors of these ideas could only think and plan these works within their own living



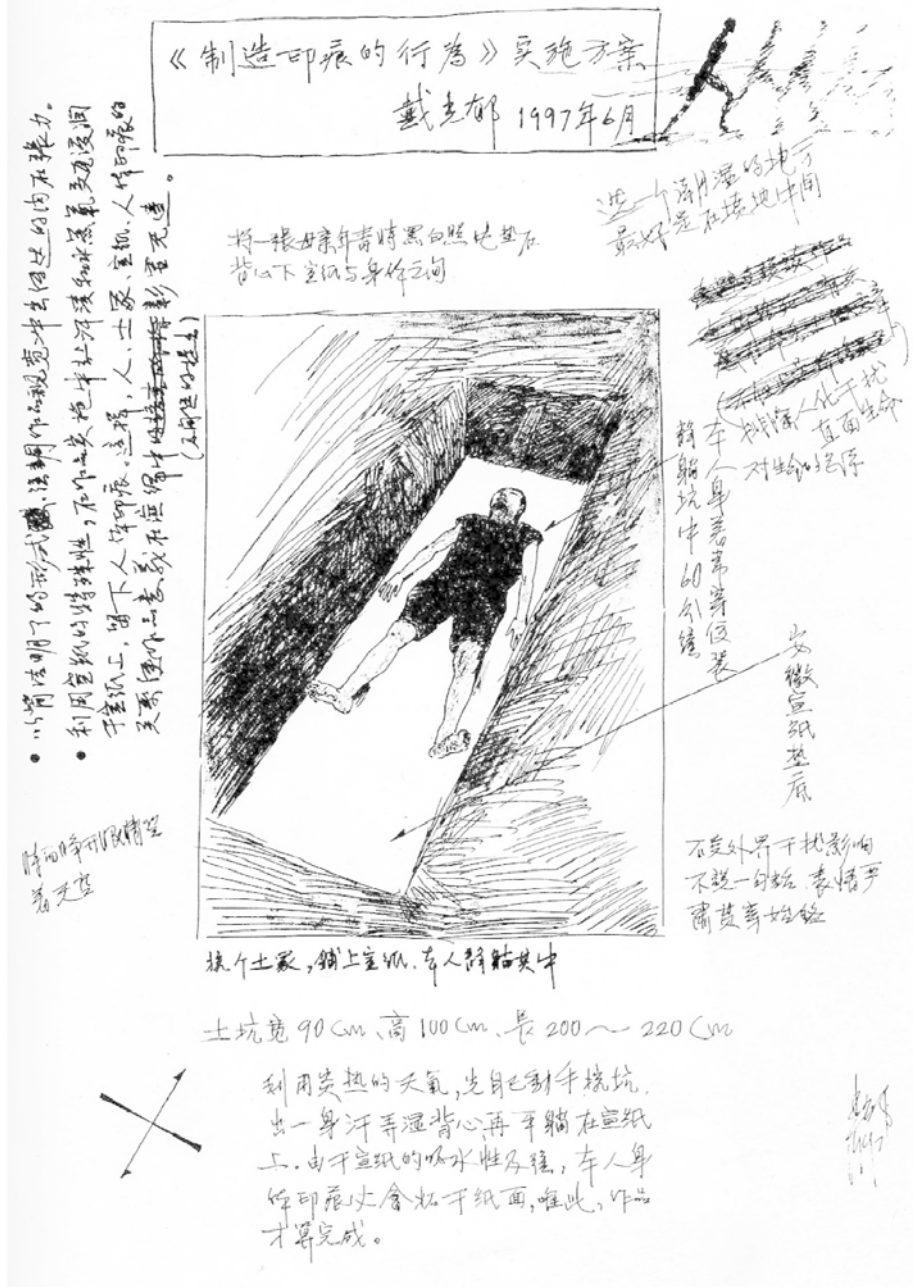


Figure 9.27 (through page 297)

The art projects of Weng Fen, Liang Juhui, Lin Yilin, and Dai
Guangyu in the catalogue of *Wilderness: Starting from Jingzhe*
(*Awakening of Insects*), 1997, 1997.

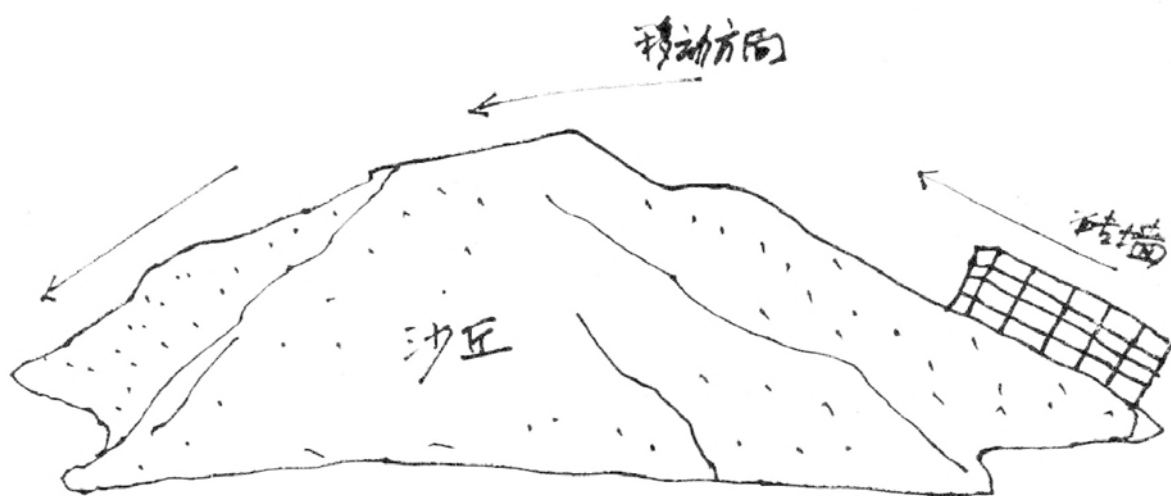
林
一
林



实施地点: 广州 Guangzhou

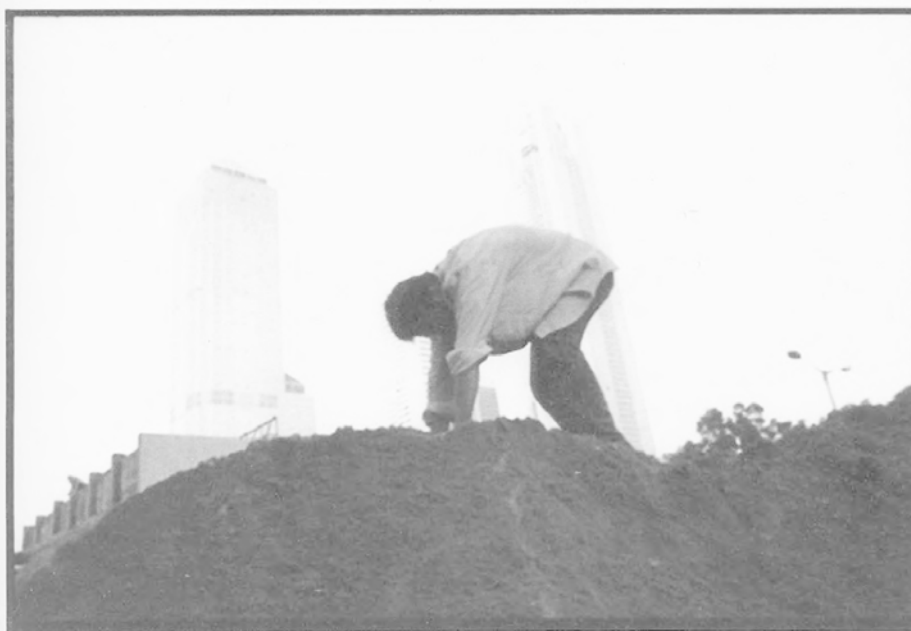
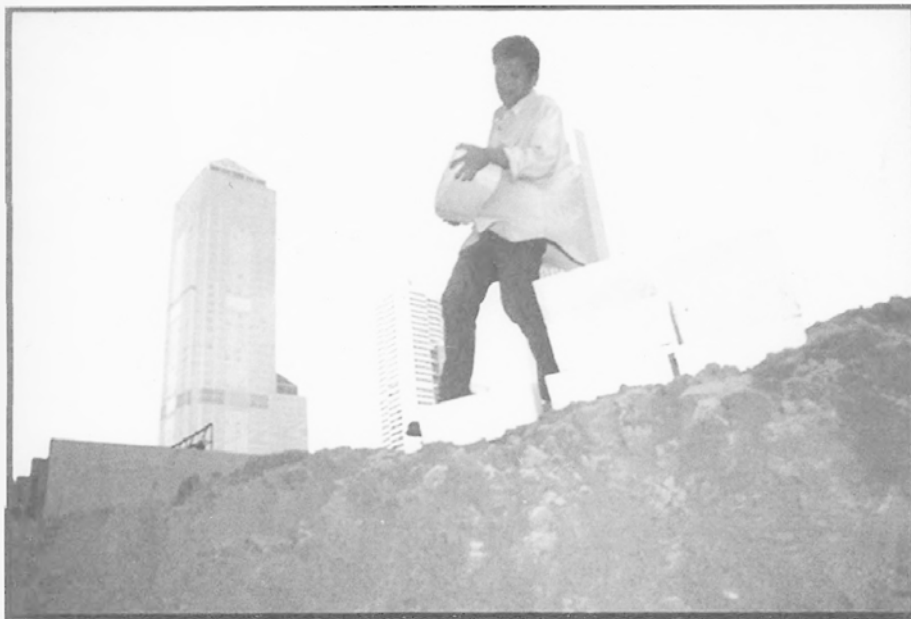
林一林
1964 年生于广州
1987 年毕业于广州美术学院雕塑
广州市美术公司创作员
现居广州

沙
丘



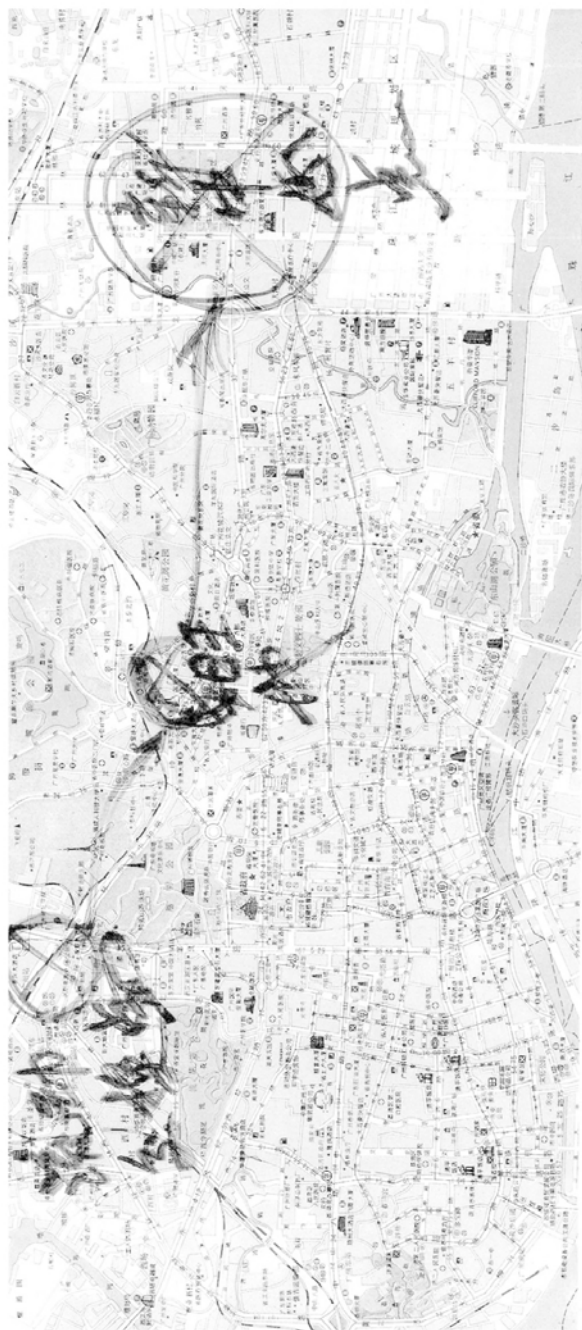
——行为《沙丘》
通过移动砖块，使墙倚靠沙丘。

林一林
97 方案



行为 30 分钟 广州建筑工地

摄影: 张海儿

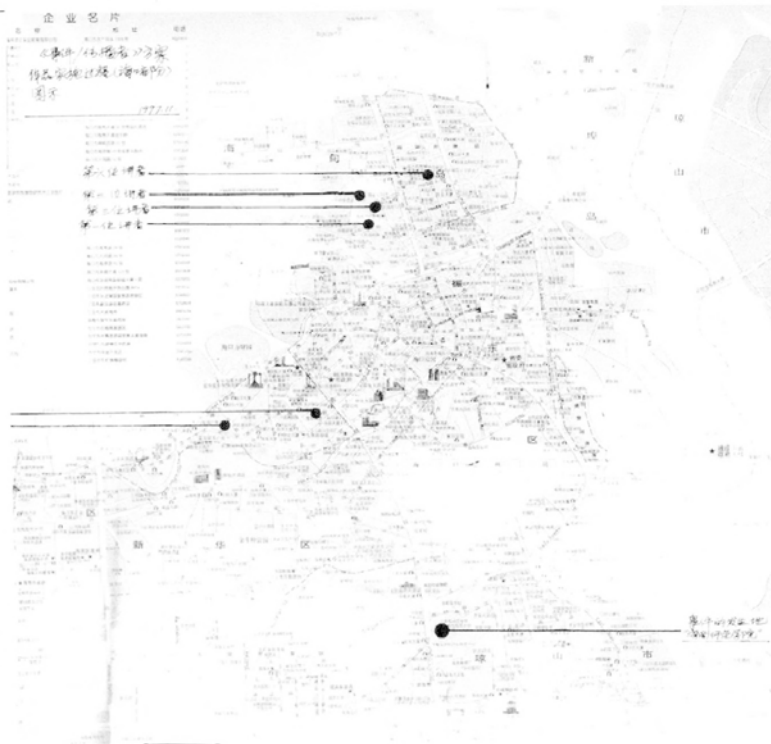


梁钜辉
1959年4月生于广州
1992年毕业于广州美院
广东电视台电视剧制作中心美术指
现居广州

实施地点 广州 Guangzhou

时间: 1998年2月15日中午12:00-下午3:00
地点: 广州火车站至环市路及天河
事件: 以近年来最能体现广州发展和变化的地方连成线, 并以旅游者身份穿行三个小时, 用照相机和录音机把所看到的的第一感觉记录下来, 以此来寻找一种新公共时空与人在这新时空运动过的协调状态。





实施地点：海口 Haikou

一、方案实施要素：

- 1、事件：发生在海口市教育界的一个真实事件。
- 2、传播者：教师、职业主持人、商人等。
- 3、地点：海口市内走动，如地图所示。

二、方案实施：

由一位讲述者对着摄像机讲述这一真实事件。艺术家把摄下的讲述内容，通过电视放给另一位看，然后，再由他把所听到的内容，用自己的语言讲述一遍。艺术家同样用摄像机记录他讲述的内容，再通过电视机放给另一位看。然后，由他再对另一位讲述自己所看到的内容。如此，重复下去至第六位。当把第六位讲述者与第一位讲述者讲述的内容对照时，会发现有许多不同之处。

三、方案实施后可能延续的：

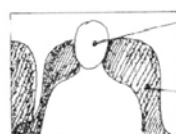
方案到此处为一个完成段。可它自由重复走动，通过不同的语言传播。如第六位讲述者的内容，通过一位讲英语者对一位美国人讲述，再由他对另一位美国人讲述，如此重复到第十二位后，再对法国人、日本人、俄国人等……最后，回到中国。最后，可对照返回后的讲述与第一位（最初）讲述者讲述的内容。

四、材料：

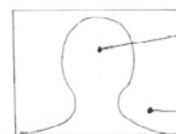
Hi8 摄像机、SONY-SLV-K190 型录相机、电视机、摄像机



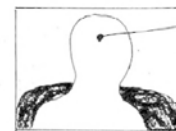
- 镜头特写，能一动，以固定镜头状态，加些推挽镜头。
- 讲述者：海南大学艺术学院讲师，李乔。
- 要求：以冷静、平穩、较真实的口气讲述。
- 地点：讲者家中客厅。



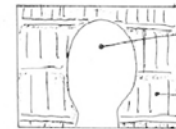
- 镜头特写，以固定镜头为主，有时推挽。
- 讲述者：海南大学艺术学院教授，谢源煜。
- 要求：用较口语化的语言与语解，讲述所看内容。
- 地点：讲者家中客厅。



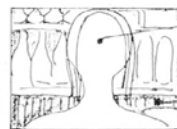
- 镜头特写，固定不动。
- 讲述者：海南大学副教授，何世林。
- 要求：用较口语化的语言与语解讲述。
- 地点：讲者家中客厅。



- 镜头特写，固定不动。
- 讲述者：海南经济广播电台主持人，吴科研。
- 要求：用较口语化的语言与语解讲述所看内容。
- 地点：讲者家中客厅。



- 镜头特写，固定不动。
- 讲述者：酒吧老板，叶剑。
- 要求：用较口语化的语言与语解讲述所看内容。
- 地点：酒吧酒吧。



- 镜头特写，固定不动。
- 讲述者：酒吧老板，叶剑。
- 要求：用较口语化的语言与语解讲述所看内容。
- 地点：酒吧酒吧。



作者正给第一位讲述者摄录讲述过程
地点：讲述者住宅



第二位讲述者正观看第一位讲述者电视录像
地点：讲述者住宅



第三位讲述者观看第二位讲述者电视录像
地点：讲述者住宅



作者正给第五位讲述者摄录讲述过程
地点：讲述者住宅



作者正给第六位讲述者讲解
地点：海口画家村酒吧



第六位讲述者观看第五位讲述者电视录像
地点：海口画家村酒吧

quarters (not studios), rather than actually sculpting, installing, or making paintings.

In the same period of time, a number of publications circulated within the art world that were related to *fang an* art. These pamphlets were not artworks, but more like underground publications read by insiders. In July 1997, Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun planned a book without a specific title, now usually referred to as the Black Cover Book, which was a collection of documentation, edited by Feng Boyi. It documented a variety of artworks, including performance pieces, installations, videos, and photography, as well as proposals and quotes from a number of artists, including some from outside of mainland China. There were, for example, Jeff Koons's pieces and performance works by Xie Deqing, a Taiwanese artist, which had a great impact on conceptual art and performance art practice at that time. Prior to that, in 1995 and 1996, the White Cover Book and Gray Cover Book came out successively. Ai Weiwei was the editor-in-chief and Zhuang Hui was the editor of both books. This series of publications contributed enormously to the development of apartment art at that time.¹⁵

Household Art Practice and Display

In the early 1990s, art productions began to be carried out in the living rooms of artists in Beijing, and these living rooms became a hub for apartment art. The earliest household art activities were probably carried out by Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, both of whom were middle-school art teachers in Beijing. They made a number of proposals and installations in their tiny living room of twelve square meters. In 1990, Song, Yin, and two of their schoolmates (also a couple) formed the Wooden Stool Group (*Bandeng xiaozu*), which met once every month. The two couples alternated hosting the meeting in their homes. They would show each other works and discuss art, but they split up in the end due to different interests.

Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen continued to make art at home. In one work they observed a loaf of decaying bread. They recorded when they bought and ate bread; Song Dong took a photograph and placed it on the lid of a glass box in which he kept the

bread. After a winter, worms hatched and continued to eat the bread for two more years, when the loaf had completely disappeared into a small pile of powder. In 1994, Song and Yin produced a number of works at home that could not be exhibited or preserved. In one piece, they poured a kettle of boiling water onto the ice-covered ground in an alley. They also wrote characters on the walls in the alleyways, and wrote diaries in water on stones. They cut books into strips, which they called *Culture Noodles*, scattering the strips of paper all over their apartment.

Yin Xiuzhen took their sweaters apart and remade an “androgynous” sweater. When they made works, they would invite artists to their home. They had visitors every day, as many as fifteen at a time. For his work *Water Writing Diary*, over a period of time Song Dong recorded wherever he went. He wrote with his fingers on the ground by the river in Houhai, on ice with a brush, on the walls at home, and then on a rock. The gesture of writing diary entries with water was a very private act. He wrote about daily events and things that he could not tell others. Gradually, Song came to regard the rock as his flesh and blood existing outside of his body. It was a part of him, and yet it did not belong to him. In 2001, *Water Writing Diary* was exhibited for the first time in the exhibition “Living in Time,” curated by Hou Hanru and Fan Di'an. Four photographic images were displayed, but Song had refused to exhibit the rock or to write in front of the public, because he considered it to be a very private act. In 1996, Song declined an offer of 200,000 yuan to buy the rock. He considered it to be part of his life, which he simply could not sell.¹⁶

Between 1993 and 1995, artists such as Zhu Jinshi, Qin Yufen, Ai Weiwei, and Xu Bing returned to Beijing from overseas, bringing with them Western contemporary art concepts, especially information about installation art. Among the returnees were Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao, who had been in New York. At their home in the Dongsu area of Beijing, a group of artists such as Chen Shaoping, Gu Dexin, Wang Luyan, Wang Jianwei, and Wang Jin gathered and showed works. In 1995, Wang Gongxin displayed *The Sky of Brooklyn*, in which he dug a hole in the floor and placed a TV screen in it. Inside the video, Wang Gongxin could be heard



Figure 9.28
Song Dong, *Bread*, 1995.



Figure 9.29
Song Dong, *A Kettle of Boiling Water*, 1995.





Figure 9.30

Song Dong, *Culture Noodles*, 1994.

Figure 9.31

Song Dong making *Culture Noodles*, 1994.

Figure 9.32

Song Dong, *Water Writing Diary*, 1995 to the present.





Figure 9.33

Wang Gongxin, *The Sky of Brooklyn*, installation in process, 1994.

saying, “What are you looking at? What is there to see?” The work was a metaphor. At the other end of the hole was his home in Brooklyn. It was inspired by the American saying that one can “dig a hole to China.” Lin Tianmiao also exhibited her installation work *Bound, Unbound*, 1995–1997, in which she used spools and spools of thread to make a form symbolic of female genitalia.

Zhu Jinshi and Qin Yufen returned to China from Germany and began to exhibit work by themselves and others in their two-room apartment in Ganjiakou, Beijing.¹⁷ Zhu Jinshi often discussed art with younger artists at home. In 1994, his home housed the first of the apartment exhibitions, “Open Sky,” which occupied only fifteen square meters. Song Dong used the balcony, Zhu Jinshi a door, and Wang Peng a corner in the room to make artwork. Wang Qingsong created an installation as well. Zhu Jinshi made a bunk bed with a sponge mattress underneath, with needles poking through. Song Dong painted the

walls of the sun porch in black and wrote on them two lines of dates that were important in his life, from his birth in 1966 through 1994. Zhu Jinshi was very interested in conceptual art and integrated concepts from Dada, minimalism, and Japanese Mono-ha. In comparison, Song Dong, Wang Peng, and Wang Jin were more concerned with the relevance of materials, and thus their works were more about perception and social experience. However, Zhu Jinshi’s interest in rationality and conceptualization influenced other artists, who began to create installations using everyday materials.

In Zhu Jinshi’s home, Wang Peng exhibited *We Live in Art*. He moved Duchamp’s toilet to the dining table, vividly revealing the essence of apartment art: eating and sleeping with art. No matter how “anti-art” Duchamp’s urinal was, it had still ultimately made its way into a public exhibition. In China’s particular political and artistic environments, art could only exist at home. Thus, unlike Duchamp,

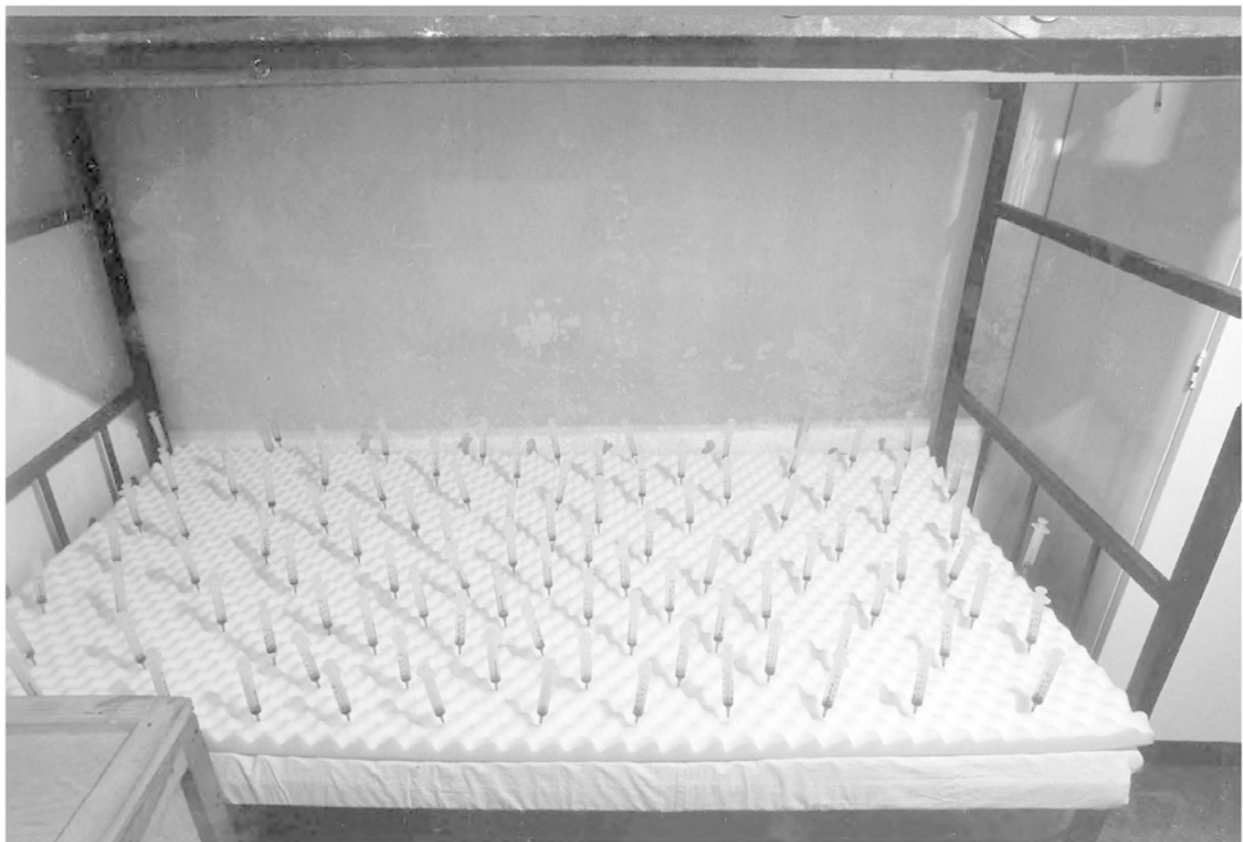


Figure 9.34

Zhu Jinshi, *Sudden Enlightenment*, 1994.

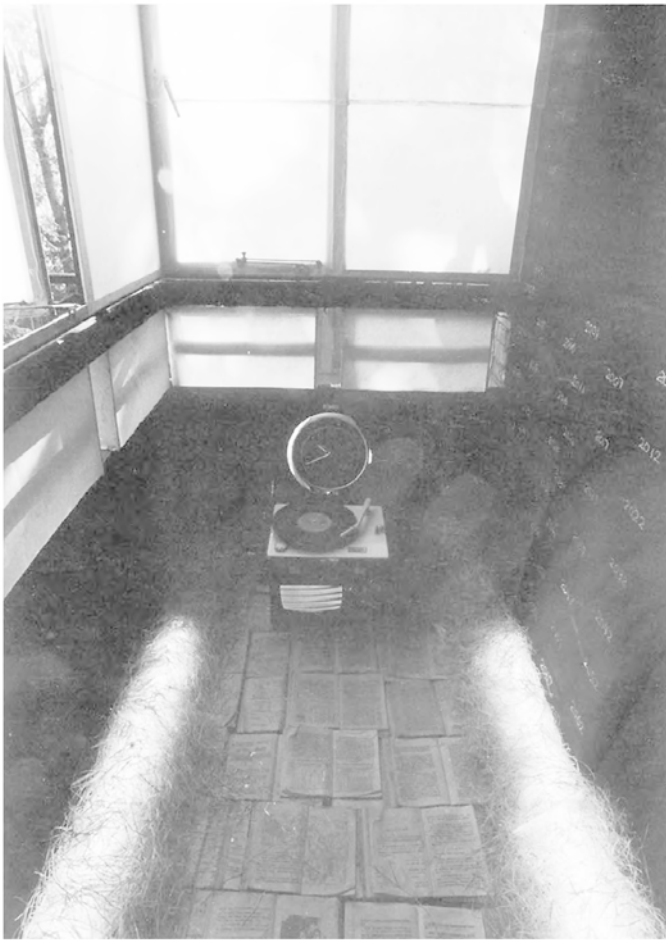


Figure 9.35
Song Dong, *Days*, 1994.

Figure 9.36
Zhu Jinshi, *Uncertainty*, 1996.



Wang Peng did not simply label the toilet as artwork or “non-art.” Instead, he allowed it to actually live alongside him in the apartment. In another work, *Noah's Ark*, he used a simple wooden box to suggest that the ark from the Bible had gotten into a Chinese private family space. The implication was that any spiritual faith and ideology had turned to a personal belief, nothing to do with the outside world.

The physical space of the apartment in apartment art became a symbol of artistic identity. It defined the artists as engaged in life, not isolated in their studios. This kind of apartment art had two features: (1) Works were made with inexpensive materials from everyday life (especially household items), making them economical and space-efficient. (2) Works could not be reproduced, reexhibited, or sold. Artists took down their works after exhibitions. Their art was only meant for the purpose of exchange. Some of these works were narratives conveying private and personal feelings, like Song Dong's *Water Writing Diary*.

In the early 1990s, a number of avant-garde artists also used apartments that were being emptied out and abandoned to mount exhibitions. In 1992, for example, Geng Jianyi created the installation work *Building No. 5, 1990*, in a residential compound in Hangzhou. In Chengdu, Dai Guangyu exhibited his political pop work in an unfinished apartment building. In Changchun, Huang Yan took rubbings and copied works on the streets in many cities and in his apartment. In addition to working in urban apartments, avant-garde artists repeated the art practice of the revolutionary artists of the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Art in Yan'an in the 1930s by taking their work to the homes of rural residents. Chen Shaofeng displayed his portraits of villagers in a rural area in Hebei province. This style of working, in which artists interact with rural communities and invite them to critique their art, was comparable to the practice of woodcarving artists Gu Yuan and Yan Han during the Yan'an period.¹⁸

At that time, the only avant-garde art venue beyond artists' living rooms was in a place called Hongxia Apartments, near the Beijing Hotel. Lin Pu and his brother Lin Song rented the space to use as an artists' studio, and they called it Hanmo Art Gallery. They exhibited the works of Wang Peng and Zhao Bandi. Afterward, they displayed Xu Bing's *Cultural*



Figure 9.37

Wang Peng, *We Live in Art*, 1994.



Figure 9.38

Wang Peng, *Noah's Ark*, 1995.



Figure 9.39

Geng Jianyi, *Building No. 5*, 1994.





Figure 9.40
Dai Guangyu, *Covered by Red*, 1993.



Figure 9.41

Chen Shaofeng, *The Report of the Social Images and Art Images of Villagers in Wangguansi Village, Dingxin County, Hebei Province*, July 1993.

Animals, but soon after that the space was shut down because the gallery printed a pamphlet titled “Hanmo Art News” and used one of Zhao Shaoruo’s photocollage works as the cover image. In the image, Zhao replaced the head of Mao Zedong with his own. The workers at the printer mistook it for Jiang Jieshi, reported it, and the officials confiscated the pamphlets.

This type of apartment art rapidly disappeared after the mid-1990s. Due to frequent invitations to overseas exhibitions and the emergence of several galleries in China, the apartment artists quickly became international touring artists. Their work no longer narrated their own lives, as it had earlier in their careers. It had now transcended the limits of the apartment and entered the international arena. The languages, forms, and materials that these artists employ now appear to be international and the stories they tell are more representative, no longer private at all. It has lost the concrete, specific, secret, and documentary character of apartment art. Some works that still retain such traits serve as footnotes to a globalized way of living for individuals. Yin Xiuzhen’s suitcases contain records of the cities that she has visited. This work reminds one of the fashionable family portraits in contemporary art of this period. Art has become a common nostalgia, a representational symptom of globalization.



Figure 9.42

Xu Bing, *A Case Study of Transference*, 1993.



Maximalism

As a phenomenon, maximalism can be seen as a part of apartment art in the sense of “meaningless” art-making in private space responding to a broader social and artistic change. As a mentality and methodology it has developed since the ’85 Movement. The process, labor-intensive and repetitious, involves both personal meditation and social critique in both the Chinese and global context.

“Abstraction”: An Inopportune Concept for Considering Contemporary Chinese Art

In the West today, the opposing notions of “abstract” and “realistic” have lost their competence to define artistic trends or genres. It also seems inappropriate to use “abstract” as even a general term for tendencies in contemporary Chinese art, but for different reasons. Actually, in contemporary Chinese art, “abstract art” (*chouxiang yishu*) in the twentieth-century Western sense does not exist at all. Paintings by Malevich, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Newman, which were made in a utopian and abstract spirit and presented in pure two-dimensional, geometric forms, can hardly be found in Chinese abstract art. The Western abstract painting theory advocated by Greenberg stated that two-dimensional form was more convincing and advanced than three-dimensional in presenting reality. Three-dimensional form was only a mimetic illusion, while the two-dimensional could exclusively and directly represent ideas. This point seems to be a repetition of Plato: according to the latter, reality is the shadow of the Idea, thus making three-dimensional art the shadow of the shadow.¹ Therefore, the two-dimensional form (abstraction) is an innovation and progression over the three-dimensional form (realism), and might

even present us with a summary of the world (idea), as illustrated in Malevich’s red and black squares or Mondrian’s grids. The whole utopian Western modernist project is “embodied” in the teleological progression of abstract forms.

This kind of abstract practice cannot be found in China, even in ancient times. Concept is alluded to in visual images, so the guiding aesthetic principle relies on “balancing likeness and unlikeness” (*si yu busi zhijian*). Although today some contemporary Chinese artists use color fields and lines in their compositions and call their works “abstract,” their two-dimensional forms are nothing but decorative works without any philosophical or spiritual significance.

Chinese Metaphysics: From Rationalist Painting to Maximalism

Abstract elements that appeal to Chinese aesthetic conceptions and conventions do exist in some Chinese paintings, installations, and photographic works. But Chinese abstract elements differ in specific ways from those in Western abstract painting. A number of such artworks appeared in China in the 1980s, and at the time I wrote an essay on rationalist painting (*lixing huihua*) to analyze the phenomenon.² As mentioned previously, at that moment, Ding Fang, Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, and others used the styles of surrealism and symbolism to allude to a type of religious manifestation. For example, the idea of a “clean and pure northern land” was used to allude to sublimity (Wang Guangyi); “high plateau” was used to imply national aspirations (Ding Fang); and others used relatively abstract forms to refer to ancient Oriental philosophy (Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Chen Zhen, Zhang Jianjun) or the origin of the universe