

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



Figure 10.1

Qiu Zhijie, *Assignment No 1: Copying the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" 1,000 Times, 1990–1995.*

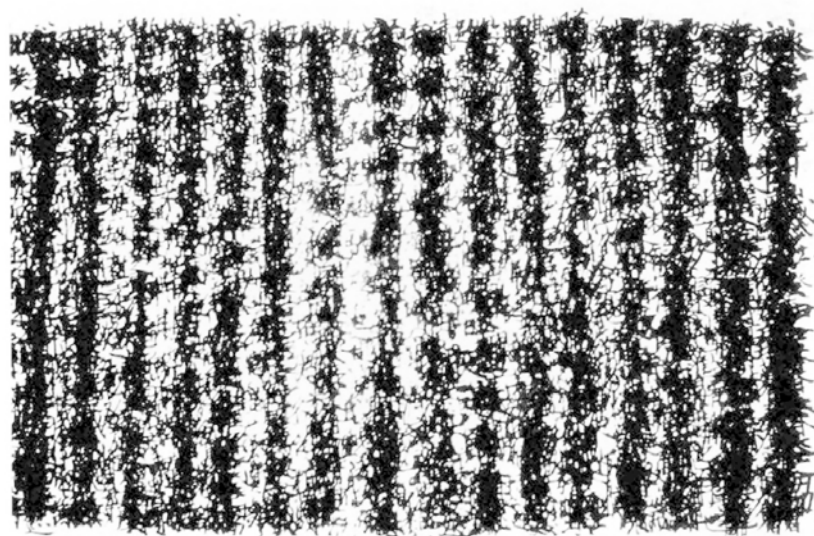




Figure 10.2

Lin Tianmiao, *Bound, Unbound*, 1995–1997.

and the evolution of mankind (e.g., Ren Jian's concept of *yuanhua*). These artists employed relatively abstract forms which could not be categorized as either two-dimensional and geometric or three-dimensional and realistic. Rather, they were imaginative, moving spaces designed to present multidimensional forms compatible with Oriental philosophical concepts, or contemporary Chinese intellectuals' thoughts on "transcendence" (*chaoyue*). All these painting types, which could be called Chinese "metaphysical" paintings, came to maturity in the mid to late 1980s. But owing to the impact of commercialism, as well as the disillusionment of political idealism after the failure of the student democratic June Fourth Movement, this kind of metaphysical painting died out gradually toward the end of the 1980s and early 1990s without reaching a developmental apex.

After a period of silence, however, another Chinese version of metaphysical painting came into

being in the early 1990s. This was not a fashionable mainstream but a silent marginal phenomenon, which did not draw the attention of the media at the time. Maximalism may not be considered a movement, complete with the solidly connected artists and groups that term implies. Rather, it was a thought trend shared by many individual artists in a lonely, practical way. Many Chinese artists employed the methods of maximalism without taking on an identity as a maximalist artist: for instance, Qiu Zhijie in his work *Assignment No. 1: Copying the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" 1,000 Times*, and Lin Tianmiao in *Bound, Unbound*. The methods used by these artists were different from those of the *lixing huibua* of the 1980s, their forms more abstract in a way that was particularly similar to minimalism in the West. In this way, the artists created a number of metaphysical paintings, installations, and video works which I call "Chinese maximalism" (*Zhongguo jiduo zhuyi*).

The reason for this name is that although the works had the appearance of Western minimalism, their conceptual approach was distinctly dissimilar from that movement. Like the minimalists, Chinese maximalist artists rejected the philosophy of early European abstract art of the 1920s and 1930s that treats painting as a representational vehicle for a utopian world embodied in different abstract patterns—the “material utopia” as remarked by Yve-Alain Bois, or the illusion of “what the world’s like” as indicated by Donald Judd.³ But Chinese maximalist artists disagreed with the minimalist philosophy that foreclosed on spiritual meaning and treated painting forms as objects in their own right, a philosophy most clearly evidenced by Stella’s remark “what you see is what you see.”⁴ Simply speaking, Chinese maximalism did not reject the elements of subjecthood and spirituality. On the contrary, it emphasized the spiritual experience of the artist in the process of creation as a mode of self-examination outside and beyond the confines of the artwork. Although in minimalism artists also emphasized process and system, or “durational experience,” the main concern of the minimalists was still based on material forms, and thus on the “object in its own right.” Their objective of “making,” through process and systematic method, eventually comes up with what Michael Fried calls the tendencies “to project objecthood” and “theatricality.”⁵ All the terms used by minimal artists, such as “shape,” “wholeness,” “Gestalt,” “order,” and “repetition,” were related to that objective. Minimalist art did not concern itself with spirituality, but rather with physical factors, e.g., objects.

Chinese maximalists, however, attempted to deny that their work could be seen as pure object, or as a type of theater in which the beholder and object are preconfigured in a physical scale with a particular distance. Rather, maximalist artists accepted that their works bore a certain spirit, not presented from the artwork (from within) but instead experienced from without. Therefore, Chinese maximalism does not attempt to involve the beholder in either “seeing” the work, as minimalism does, nor “thinking” about the work, as modern European art does. The former has an onward-based nature and the latter an outward-based nature. Chinese maximalism, one might say, is above all committed to a *transward*-based nature.

We may consider the artworks of Chinese maximalism to be incomplete and fragmented records of daily meditation. Gu Dexin’s *Object as Living Life* (*Wuzhi zuowei huode shengming*), for example, consisted of the action of pinching flesh, in the form of raw meat, every day; Li Huasheng’s *Diary*, an ink painting series with a repeatedly drawn grid pattern, was another example. Many maximalist artists liked to name their works “diary,” emphasizing the meaning inherent in the action of making art, which was seen by the artists as part of their daily praxis. In other words, we are not allowed to read meanings directly from the art forms of maximalism *per se*. The work functions as what is often called *liushui zhang* in Chinese, literally, “an account book of streaming water,” which means an everyday record of something that is extremely unimportant, trivial, and fragmented from daily life. Therefore, there was no such thing as a compositional principle with any hierarchical form, nor any compositional idea like “wholeness,” in maximalist art. Chinese maximalism did not emphasize the oppositions of subject and object, spirit and material, or center and margin. The work was not a reflection of the artist’s thoughts or the universal spirit, nor was it a purely physical object. Every factor was in a state of transformation without a clear boundary, and artwork was a natural, repetitious, fragmentary process, just like *liushui zhang*. The *wo*, or “subject” (the artist), apart from the *liushui zhang* (the artwork) is nowhere to be found, because the *wo* is already sealed everywhere in the work. Some typical examples can be found in Ding Yi’s *Cross Series*, Zhu Xiaohé’s paintings, and Song Tao’s *49,368 Square Millimeters*. In this regard, one may consider maximalism as a tendency to combine deconstruction and dematerialization in a manner similar to that of Western postmodernism.

In the Chinese context, however, the primary objective of maximalism is to question and overthrow assumptions about the meaning of the artwork: that the meaning is contained and expressed by the object, that the object is a unique and privileged product of human culture containing the commonly held values of virtue and creativity. The practice of maximalism inquires: Who confers meaning on an artwork? How is the meaning presented and interpreted?

The artists of the 1980s, whether they were members of the rationalist painting group or expressionists of the current of life (*shengming zhiliu*) group, all believed that the spiritual meaning of the work was imparted by its creator. They also believed that all those meanings should unquestionably be accepted by audiences. This elite philosophy was very similar to that of the Western modernists of the early twentieth century. The phenomenon of political pop, along with novelist Wang Shuo's "rascal" (lowbrow) or *pizi wenxue* literature in the early '90s, negated, to a certain extent, the past utopian ideal represented by the Mao Zedong era and the elite utopian ideology of anti-Maoist utopias represented by 1980s avant-garde art. Nonetheless, this negation of essential meaning, or meaninglessness, was mostly manifested in their attitude toward the artist's life philosophy, not in their methodology for developing expressive meaning inherent in the works. In other words, they really believed that they could confer, or had conferred, works with meaningless content, which shows that they did not differ much from the artists of the 1980s. The difference only lies in the fact that the latter demonstrated idealism, the former disillusionment. The critique and interpretation of cynical art from the early 1990s resulted in an overemphasis on the ideological concept of cynicism. Although various interpretations based on ridicule, hollowness, ennui, and disillusionment had some practical significance at the beginning, they soon became dogmatic and vulgarized. Furthermore, the works of the cynical realists, as highly commodified objects, only arbitrarily concerned themselves with meaning on the canvas. As art circles were then full of the discourse of "overinterpretation," the real crisis was concealed. The greatest critical oversights in this period were based on the failure to note the lack of methodology in contemporary Chinese art, the fact that imitation became utterly fashionable, as well as the fact that artists and their products became commercialized and institutionalized, so that the narration of "meaning" developed in a false and impoverished framework.

It was under these circumstances that Chinese maximalism, an alternative metaphysical art form, started to challenge the meaning of art from various extremely personal approaches, thus rebelling against

the "hollow meaning" fad of cynical art. Maximalism, in other words, attempted to depart both from idealism (modernist type) and from anti-idealism (postmodernist type) in the context of Chinese contemporary art.

It should be noted that this tendency was not only targeted at art circles in China, but may also have implied a criticism of the neo-Orientalist and postcolonialist practices in contemporary Chinese art practice that still flourish in the context of globalization, in particular when Chinese "abstract" and conceptual painting has been overlooked by Western markets and institutions in the last three decades. For instance, Zhu Xiaohe remarked in a very extreme way that his paintings were composed of an abstruse language. Endorsing the concept of maximalism, he believed that maximalism amounted to an inroad into the territory of Westerners. Using abstruse language is a rebellion: "Our national style (if there is one) is not a simple linguistic narrative form as believed by them [Westerners]. It is an unfamiliar nationality, not one the eyes of Westerners are familiar with."⁶ The cynical fad was only concerned with how to discover a symbolic image representing "Chinese people," so as to satisfy Westerners' preoccupation with, and ability to recognize, the "other."

In summary, maximalist works posed questions for the linguistic "meaning" of art mainly along the following lines:

1. Almost everyone involved in maximalism was opposed to self-expression or a representation of reality, and denied that an artist could confer meaning on an artwork.
2. There was no way to interpret the meaning of an artwork (text), as interpretation per se was another code (text) made in a different context. However, some Chinese artists attempted to bind this deconstructive theory with certain particular personal experience. Zhu Xiaohe copied an ancient piece of art known to everyone by repeatedly using similar short lines, which resulted in a different "abstract" painting. Wu Yiming, by a similar method, used traditional Chinese painting forms to interpret paintings of beauties in ancient costumes. Instead of imitations, their works of copying were a kind of individual meditation, or what Zhu called "metaphysical executions" (*xingershang yunzuo*).

3. As the meaning of artwork existed in process and change, subject to changes of individual experience, the artists paid attention to process by completing an experiential process through different forms of labor or handicraft, of which the completed works were only incomplete fragments.
4. The unfolding of meaning was limitless, the extremity of which was nothingness (*wu*). “Nothingness” could not be represented by any form, for “Loud is its sound, but never word it said. A semblance great, the shadow of a shade” (*dayin xisheng, daxiang wuxing*), as Laozi wrote in the *Daode jing*. Nonetheless, maximalism implied infinity and the endlessness of numbers through the repetition of quantities. Therefore, “many” is not something substantial or quantitative but insubstantial and hollow, in spite of the serial, orderly, reasonable, and neat appearance. It is the accumulation of many similar contingencies.
5. This inevitably led maximalism to Chan Buddhism in two philosophical aspects. One is meditation, the other skepticism to any doctrine. That was why most of the artists were seeking experiences in the process of making artwork similar to Chan.

Against Expression and Representation: The First Aspect of Maximalism

Almost all the artists mentioned here denied that the meaning of a work was generated by the artist him or herself. They thought that a work had nothing to do with its creator once it was finished. This point was stated adamantly by Wu Shanzhuan in the middle of the 1980s. Recall that he argued that a work is like a plant, and the artist is the soil. Whether the soil is fertile or not will not affect the essential nature of the plant, as an artist’s motivation will not change the meaning of the artwork. Sharing this view, Gu Dexin also never endeavored to explain the meaning of his work. There is no evidence to show that Chinese artists were influenced by poststructuralism, as the writings of Roland Barthes were barely known in the Chinese art world of the 1980s. However, the ideas of Wu Shanzhuan, Gu Dexin, Ding Yi, and Zhu Xiaoyi on the meaning of the “text” (the artwork) were very similar to those of Barthes. The ideas of the Chinese artists were not born out of philosophical logic, but instead were closely related to the specific reality of

contemporary Chinese art. They were intended as a criticism of the tendency to overinterpret or create an overflow of meaning. Decades of socialism in China had conditioned artists to practice realism exemplified by a “preconceived motif” (*zhuti xian xing*) thought pattern, which was manifested in different ways in different periods. Audiences were also trained to be the passive receivers of given meaning. Under these conditions, the maximalist artists committed themselves to freezing their expressive desires and attempting to eliminate their intentions, thereby compelling themselves to be tools that did not use their brains, but only their hands.

Ding Yi’s *Cross* Paintings

Ding Yi’s *Cross Series*, and his accompanying theories, are good examples of Chinese serialism. Counting the first *Cross* works, which were created in 1988, Ding has been producing this kind of painting for twenty-two years. Although different ideas may have occurred to him during this period, the basic method and its clear-cut cross form have remained. Ding’s formalist pattern is, however, based on an antiformalist concept. He is “skeptical about treating pure art language as the ultimate goal,” believing that “the purpose of making paintings is not to justify the real world mirrored on the canvas.” In other words, he thinks painting is neither a display of visual form nor a presentation of reality or nature. It is what it is, a work undertaken “within the deep logic of language structure and its denoting concept.” It is the product of the methodology of the artist.⁷

Ding’s idea went against the mainstream of Chinese avant-garde art at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, for he belonged neither to the “pure language” (*chunhua yuyan*) neoacademicism nor to the “grand soul” (*dalinghun*) expressionism of the late ’80s or the political pop and cynical realism of the early 1990s. Instead, he regarded art as a precise manipulation, which was expressed by his cross shapes, because the cross in printing is a simple sign of measurement that everyone can recognize. As this pure, clear expressive method is close to science, it is far removed from humanistic connotations, suggesting no cultural themes. Most importantly, its simple form provides Ding with the possibility

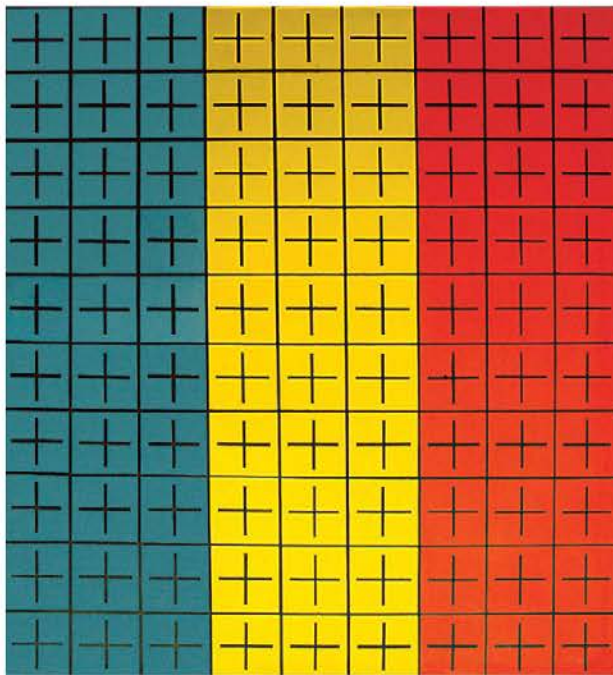


Figure 10.3

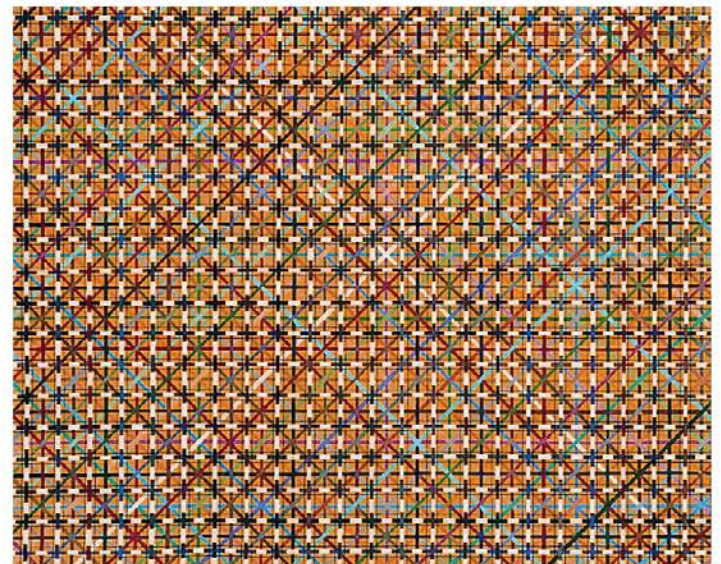
Ding Yi, *Appearance of Cross Series: 1988-1, 1988.*

Figure 10.4

Ding Yi, *Appearance of Cross Series: 1990-1, 1990.*

of continuous and monotonous manipulation. He could calmly draw crosses on the canvas, making them as precise as possible, without harboring any desire to reconstruct or destroy culture. What he had was only the feeling of making contact with something substantial, such as his brush, chalk, or canvas. This “sense of substantiation” forced the artist to abandon and escape from any desire to spin illusions.

The “sense of substantiation” was also the basis of his automatic color selection principle, which was based on “a distrust of Cézanne and Matisse’s color theory.”⁸ There is no composition principle at all, for he can start drawing crosses from one side and end up on the other, or vice versa. Technique he views as a mediocre handicraft skill. He adopts his technique without any preconceived concepts, a mere manipulation similar to a female farmer weaving denim. Nevertheless, the meaning of manipulation is not an aim in and of itself, but it seeks to point to a meaning of the norm achieved by the manipulation. The artist has no right to go beyond this norm to “express” himself, and he is not able to do this at all if the norm is not available.



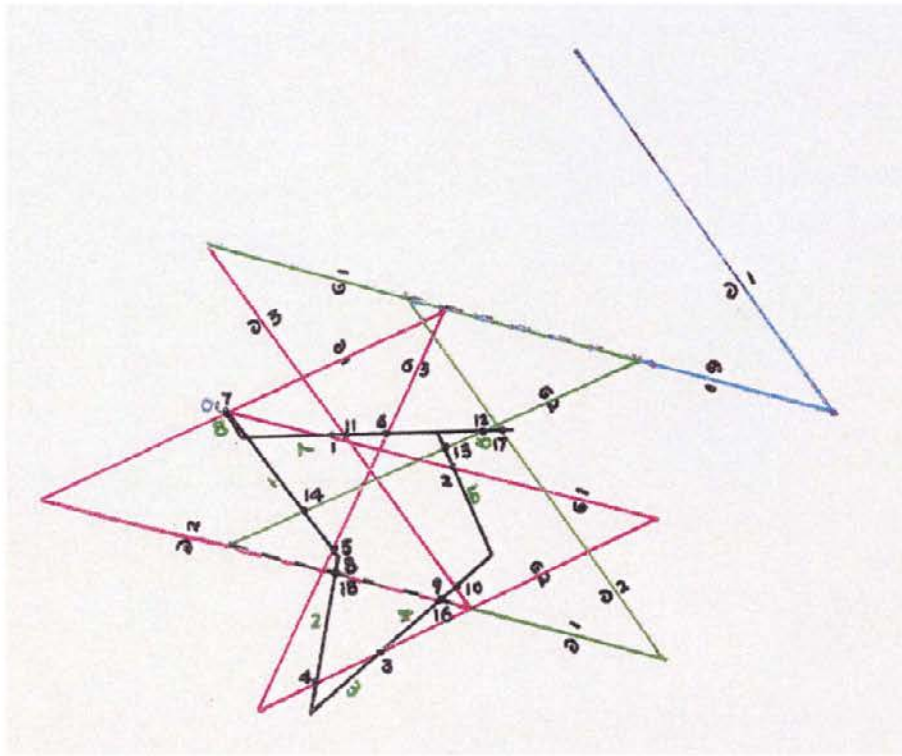
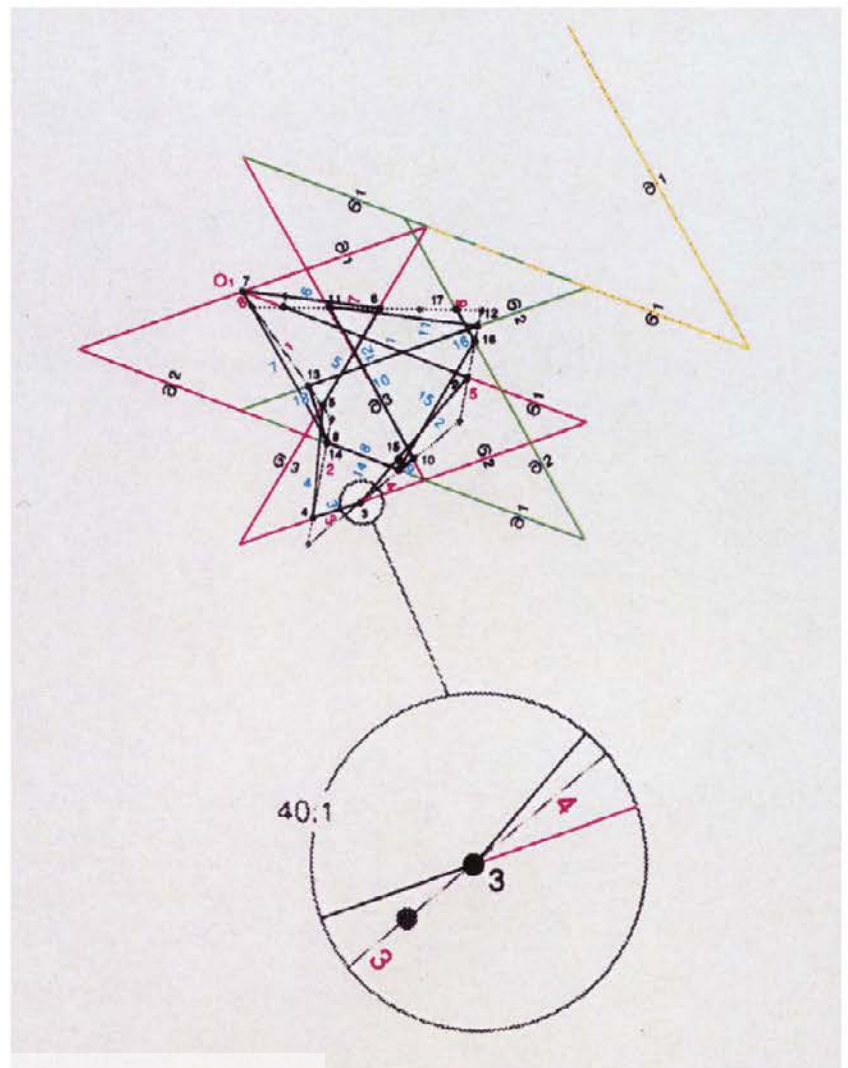
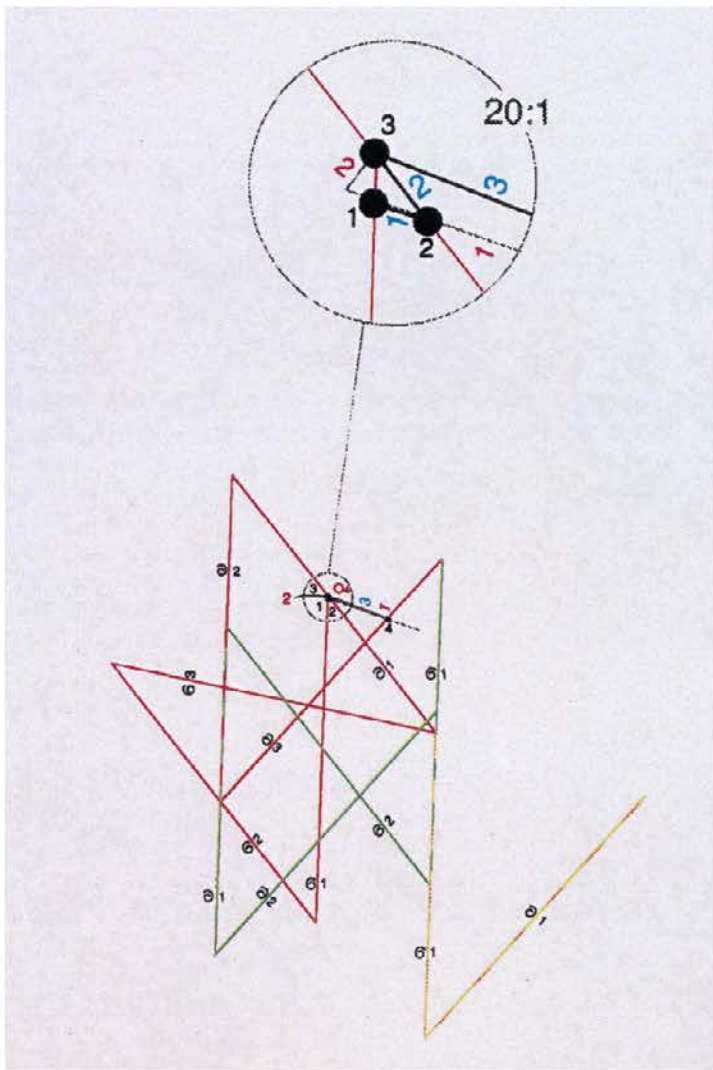


Figure 10.5
New Mark Group (Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping, and Gu Dexin). *The Works of the New Mark Group No. 1*, 1991.





It is only through this process that artists can get some spiritual release and inspirational experience. As Ding puts it, “creative inspiration comes from the experience of continuous work; an endless, deeply engaged, and open working condition makes the creativity of an artist separate from the limitations set by his ideology.”⁹ This reminds me of the work done by the New Mark Group at the beginning of the 1990s. After laying down strict collective rules, these artists worked in turns, making their paintings like geometric diagrams. Personal irrationality and desire for expression were eliminated by strict ground rules. In their works, it would be impossible to detect any trace of emotion or meaning except a sense of freedom imparted to them by abiding by the rules and escaping the constraints of meaning.

“Metaphysical Operations”: The Second Aspect of Maximalism

Words and artistic images are two different semiotic systems. Any interpretation, whether using images to illustrate words or vice versa, constitutes another text. This has been discussed in the theories of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, Roland Barthes’s semiotics, and Derrida’s deconstruction. But maximalist artists do not like to push the relationship between interpretation and text, or word and image, to the extreme. They discovered the nature of the “mingling of ‘you’ and ‘I’” or *nizhong youwo, wozhong youni*, and put forward the interpretive approach of “there is painting in poetry just as there is poetry in painting” or *shizhong youhua, huazhong youshi*, and “viewing poetry versus reading painting” or *guanshi duhua*. As a result, the gap is bridged between image and word, as well as between imagination and concept.

The artist Zhu Xiaohe uses a *guanshi duhua* approach, employing color and lines on the canvas, instead of words on a page, to interpret and read a painting, as he did in relation to the ancient painting *Three Court Ladies* in creating his own painting of the same name. Another “text” (a new painting) was thus created by the traces formed by the crowded colored lines on the canvas. This painting lives off others in terms of “meaning” and “form,” without its own “theme” and narrative content. It has neither the ordinary painting elements of expression

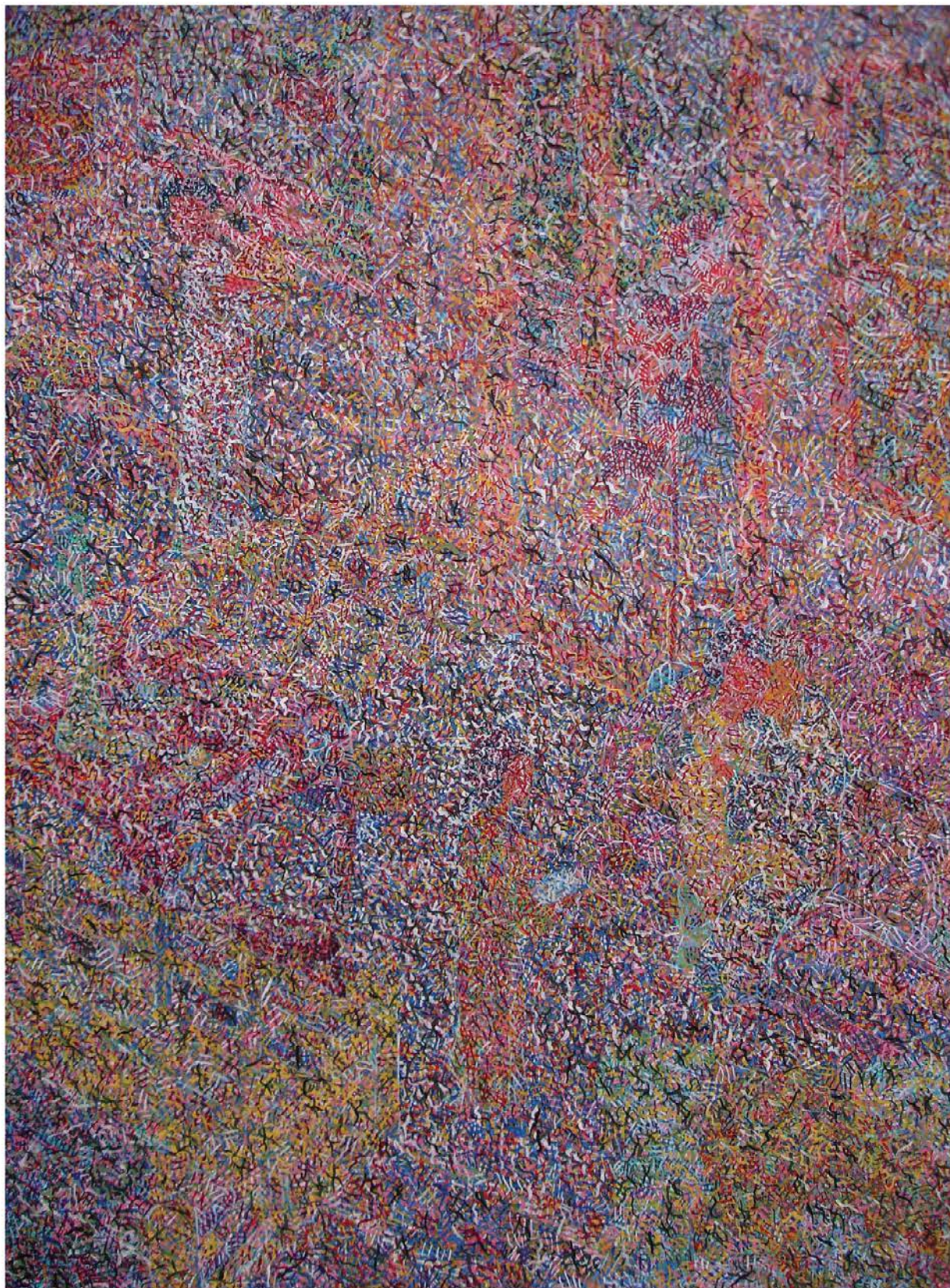


Figure 10.6

Zhu Xiaohu, *Three Court Ladies*, 2002.

apart from stroke and color field, nor any semiotic functions of “signifier versus signified.” Just as Zhu says, “the broken layers generated by overdrawn lines represent another form of thinking, the thought of seeing. It only allows us to see, not understand. It is not the expression of inner consciousness, feelings, and beliefs, but the new feelings and experience of seeing.”¹⁰ The “seeing,” however, does not lead to any directions in aesthetics, philosophy, or narrative. It is just seeing itself.

Zhu was one of the participants in the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition held in Beijing in 1989. In the 1990s, he started to select more abstract short lines as the “word” elements he used to interpret paintings. His paintings of short lines were not specific, and they existed without any direct images for reference. As Zhu himself said, “my writing [painting] is not one that is measured, expressive, and has a purpose, but goes beyond writing, an overlapping writing, writing that generates another writing, which gives rise to complex and abstruse layers of small lines, making recognition and easy representation impossible. It transcends the clear, dull, and simplified subject matter. The outer images become layers of confused lines, obscuring images, and the writing keeps overlapping and dismantling without being able to stop and coming to any conclusion.”¹¹ Thus, he called his paintings “interpretive and complex writing” (*jieshixing fuza shuxie*) or “metaphysical operations” (*xingershang yunzuo*).

The “metaphysical” here did not refer to Kant, because Zhu was opposed to any preconceived meaning or universalist idea. His “metaphysics” was only an automatic writing without presupposition; writing itself was the noumenon, the meaning and the language. In Zhu’s eyes, language was nothing more than labor.¹² Because it presents the status of the “writer,” language excludes the presupposition of all “meanings.” Zhu believed in exhibiting oneself in an open way, and declaring oneself not to be an accessory of imposed “truth.” “Truth” should not be understood as “correct,” but as the language itself being interpreted. Language precedes man, as language is the space where man exists. Zhu said, “I don’t know what reality is when I am not writing. ... Writing is like instruments, which I always look

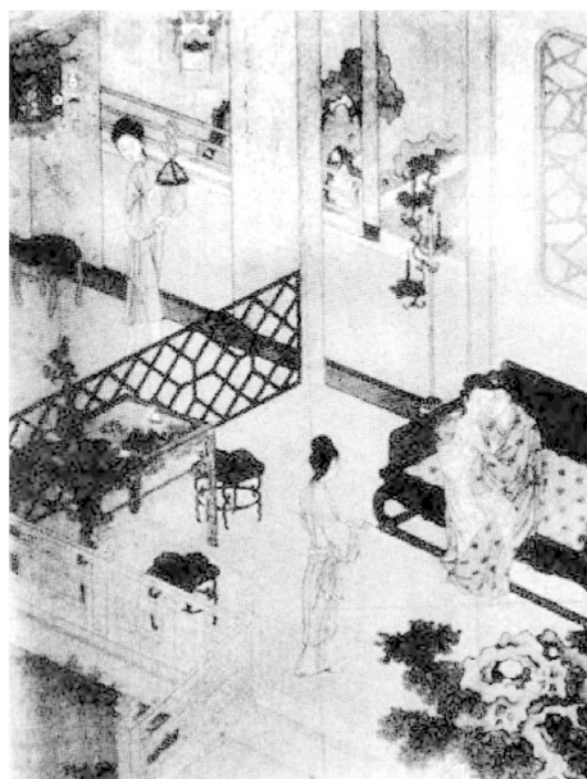


Figure 10.7

Unknown artist, *Three Court Ladies*, date unknown.

at, not the scene outside the window. It’s like a pilot in a cockpit, where he seeks direction through instruments, not his naked eyes.”¹³

Zhu’s lines were neutral, without revolution or counterrevolution, emotion, tendencies, localities, or overall conceptions. Only this neutrality in operation could lead to “deideologization,” and make any categorized “Chineseness” and “correctness” superficial. Take for example the idea of “Oriental beauty” that is linear and decorative, as might be demonstrated by the ancient painting *Three Court Ladies*. In Zhu’s interpretive version, these “nationalistic aesthetic features” were obscured. This was a strategic “overwriting” (*guodu shuxie*) aimed at opposing cultural hegemony.¹⁴ In order to make his interpretive process more neutral, he formulated rules to ensure that interpretive levels were preserved on the canvas, so the initial and last lines were demonstrated in the crowded canvas without any differentiation. Line-drawing (writing) was only production, without any fanciful notions; he discarded any elements of



Figure 10.8

Zhu Xiaohu, *Educating the Children*, 2001.



Figure 10.9

Unknown artist, *Educating the Children*, date unknown.

representation or expressiveness. This “production is a form of resistance against immediacy, subjectivity, conceptual representation, simple imitation, and formalism in contemporary art. Maximalism is bound to be obscure and go beyond nomenclature, forms, and images.”¹⁵ “Production is obscure and ambiguous, as opposed to information and fashion, as well as commonly stereotyped notions and slogans.”¹⁶ We can see the antimainstream attitude and his criticism of the institutional power system in Zhu’s critical comments concerning his motivation.

Another maximalist, Wu Yiming, is from Shanghai. As a traditional Chinese painter, in 2002 he produced a series of ink paintings of beauties in ancient costumes.¹⁷ For example, he drew ten ink paintings that were “exactly the same” as the ancient beauties paintings unearthed in Hetian, in the Xinjiang autonomous region. He would make a draft, then draw a contour line to copy the original Hetian painting. Then he used traditional ink wash techniques, operating in multiple layers, to blur the contour and colors of the female figure. The final result was an ancient beauty without facial features or detailed textile patterns. What he strove for through complicated labor was a kind of uncertainty and undecidability, similar to Zhu’s “overwriting.” He wanted to obtain an experience in his “reading” and “writing,” a sense of the impossibility of imitating an artwork of the past and a sense of distance from the mysterious past. That’s why he could take great pains to draw “the same painting” ten times. In terms of visual effects, his paintings have a simple, succinct, and pure beauty that is traditional, experienced, nonvisual. He repeatedly reexperienced the feelings of the ages being unearthed by his brushes. When the same ten paintings are juxtaposed together, they may suggest minimalist works, but this is not what Wu wanted to achieve; rather he strove to dig out something experienced, not visualized, that was beyond the ancient visual form itself. In order to achieve this, he continued to make his brush strokes and ink wash overlap, layer by layer, until the original clear appearance of the ancient painting had disappeared. The original experience he gained through his repetition came at the price of the disappearance of the origin.

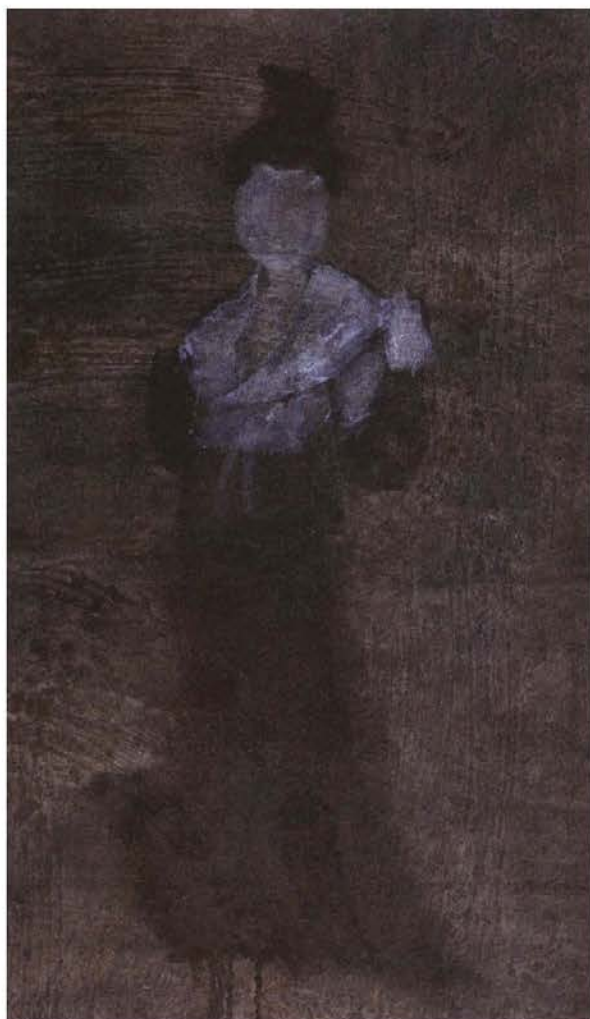


Figure 10.10

Wu Yiming, *It Looks Beautiful—The Second Performance*, 2002.



Beyond Objects—Meaning Only Lies in the Process: The Third Aspect of Maximalism

Chinese maximalism is opposed to logocentrism, a European and American tradition which seeks essence, oneness, truth, and clear-cut consciousness. In contrast to the Euro-American tradition, Chinese tradition puts more emphasis on the changes in and contextualization of meaning. As in the example of ancient literati painting, the narrative meaning of an artwork is not important. Meaning is related to one's accomplishments in every aspect of his lifetime, his temperament and the tastes of his circle, or his circumstances. The Chinese maximalist artists pay more attention to the process of creation and the uncertainty of meaning and instability in a work. Meaning is not reflected directly in a work, because they believe that what is in the artist's mind at the moment may not necessarily appear in his work. In fact, it is often absent.

Therefore, many artists repeat the same movement or form in order to make the absent self "stay put," or, from another perspective, to reach the distillation of meditation and pure spirituality by eliminating any desire for self-expression through certain physical repetitions (repeated forms) and a continuously meaningless labor-intensive operation. Continuousness, repetition, and monotonous labor often constitute the characteristics of maximalism. Although the works also have physical forms, they always fail to convey an idea. This is because the artists believe that the real meaning remains in every moment, which is always developing, changing, and merging with the ones before and after it, in an endless environment. It is like a monk chanting Buddhist scripture. Each time he chants "Amitabha," the meaning changes corresponding to the time and space in which he chants it. Each of his chants is a product of the moment, related to the extent of his understanding through meditation (his dialogue with his surroundings and his inner world). As a result, meaning can never stay put in a materialistic form, which only implies the process, and it can never embrace or substitute for the real experiential meaning.

Gu Dexin started his conceptual art activities as early as the beginning of the 1980s. The forms he used ranged widely and included two-dimensional

work, installation, and digital output. He always thought that the meaning of the work had nothing to do with him, because it could never be reached. He was more concerned with the relationship between himself and the materials, or with how to make his works more materialistic and formalistic. The materials he used were often found in nature or from animals (such as meat, apples, or flowers), or elsewhere (industrial materials such as plastics and glass). Meat and plastic, natural body and industrial material, however, are always in correspondence, as in the work *Wuti* (Untitled) which he displayed in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in 1989.¹⁸ He often used repetitive forms, not for the sake of the beauty of the compositional arrangement, but for the intensified contrast between the "look" of others and the "experience" (touching, for instance) by himself. A case in point is the work *Object as Living Life* or *Pinching the Flesh* (*Nie rou*), created from 1997 to 1998. For a period of time, he would pinch a piece



Figure 10.11

Gu Dexin, *Untitled*, 1989.

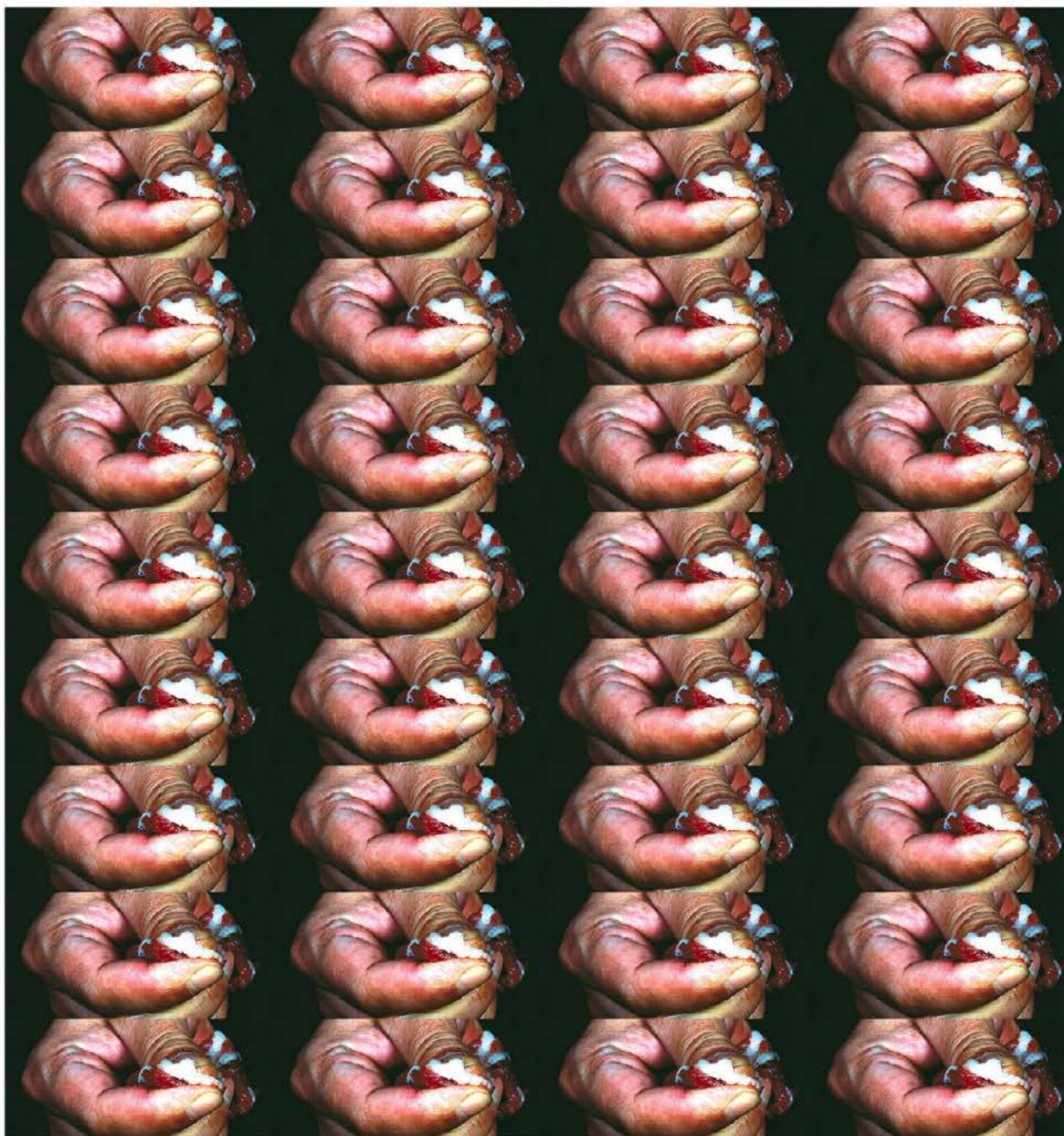


Figure 10.12

Gu Dexin, *Pinching the Flesh: Object as Living Life*, 1998.

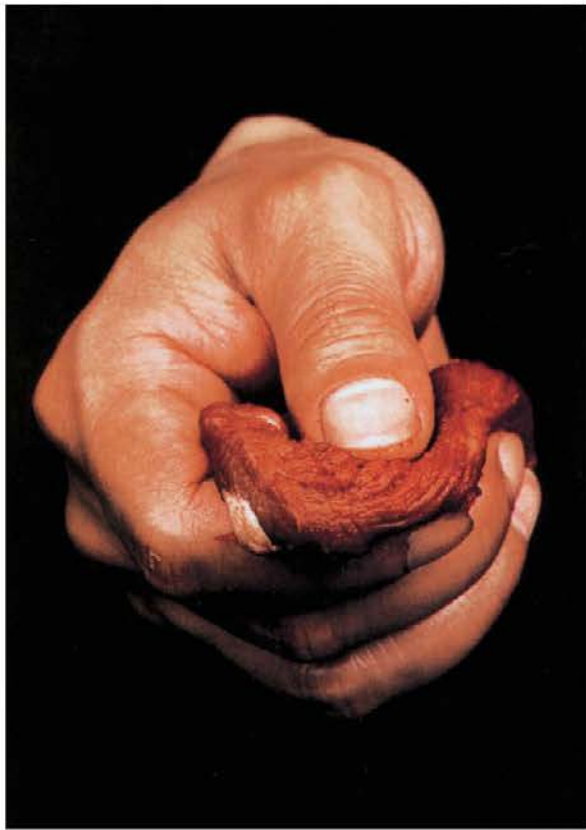


Figure 10.13

Gu Dexin, *Pinching the Flesh: Object as Living Life*, detail, 1998.

of pork every day until he had pinched it dry. The kind of unique and strange feelings involved in this action have been shared by all of us, though we might not express them as clearly. Each time he pinched the pork, Gu would take a photo (and not a video recording) of the event. Photography was the only medium that could record a transient moment of the entire process, not unlike the “Amitabha.”

The photographs could not encompass the whole process of Gu’s action. We can imagine Gu, a man full of life, sitting there pinching the water and blood out of a dead life form, experiencing the constant contact between life and death. No meaning, whether rooted in boredom, catharsis, nausea, or sexuality, can ever be truly revealed to us. What the viewers got from his exhibition of “pinching flesh” was only the elegance of false pretenses and the ritual scene in a temple-like space. The photos of hands pinching the pork were neatly arranged, like a series of abstract paintings. The pieces of pork, dried by pinching, were laid on a table covered in a red cloth, like the remains of a deceased person waiting for others to pay their last respects. Gu seemed to deliberately create a distance between what the viewers saw and the real “meaning” that he experienced in the process of creating the work, so as to conceal in the unknown world what he alone had experienced. What he had created was only a provocative scene, lending force to the veil of “meaning.”



Figure 10.14

The exhibition of *Pinching the Flesh: Object as Living Life*, 1998.

In recent years, Li Huasheng has produced a good deal of abstract painting in ink and wash. Because he is a Chinese painter well versed in traditional literati painting, it is surprising to many that his recent works are similar to the minimalist style of the West. On the surface, Li's paintings are grids made of ink lines, not much different from the abstract paintings of the West. But there is a distinction both in their spiritual connotations and creative processes.

Li lives in a three- to four-hundred-year-old community in Chengdu that has been swallowed up by new cement buildings. For the past few years, he has been engaged in a fight with the government for the right to stay in his current home; the rest of his time has been spent working on abstract paintings. His paintings are representations of his real life, which is repetitive, quiet, and lonely. The plane of the painting is more than just the plane of the canvas itself: it is also the cubic space in which he lives. Other than that, no additional meaning or aesthetic feeling is expressed.

Figure 10.15

Li Huasheng, 2000.3.9, 2000.



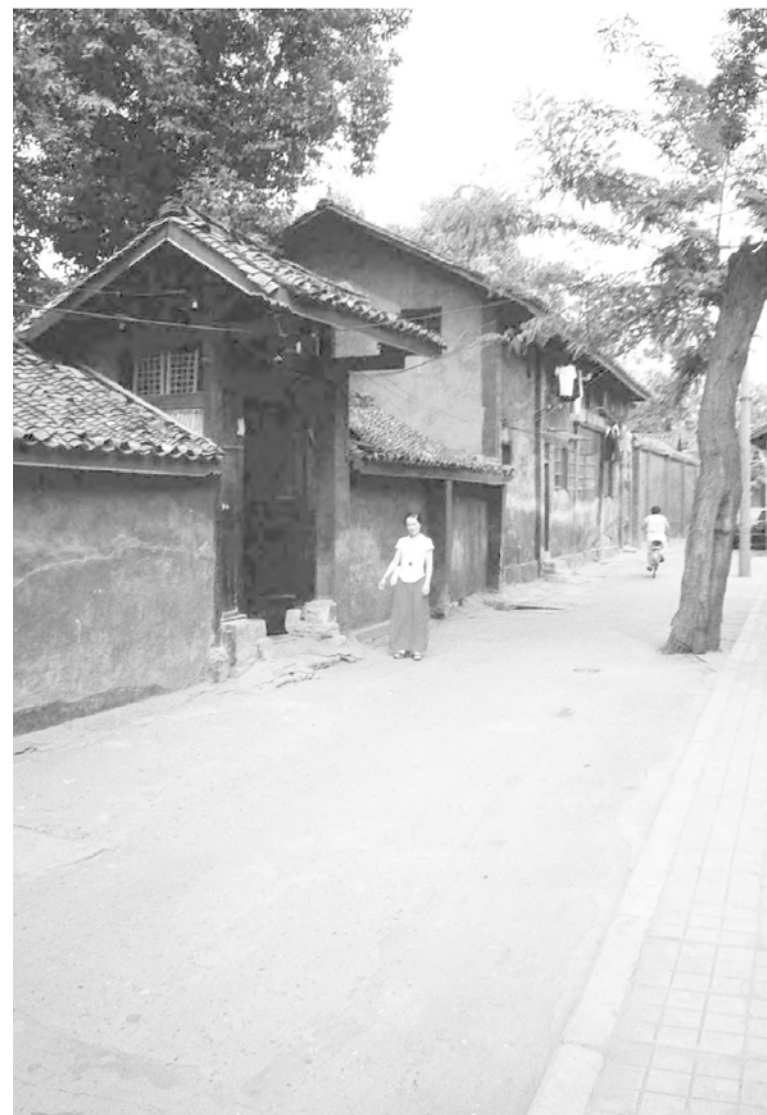


Figure 10.16

Li Huasheng's home, photographed by the author with his wife Sun Jing standing outside the gate when they visited Li, 2003.

Li draws along hidden lines on the rice paper, sometimes in short bursts but usually in long strokes. Most of the time, the lines pass continuously across the paper from left to right or from top to bottom. Instead of light touches without any control, the lines are “written” out with considerable force focused on the tip of the brush. We cannot understand the lines by Li without first comprehending why the Buddhist priest Hong Yi would spend six minutes writing only one Chinese character. The process of brush movement is very slow because the artist concentrates on his spiritual motion leading the brush, rather than on the stylized, outward appearance of a character or a line. Sometimes, Li would work on the same line many times, so that the ink would soak into the small squares formed by the intersections of different lines, generating an unexpected effect. He also wrote down thickly dotted “seals,” or Chinese characters similar in shape to seals, on hidden squares of the rice paper. These lines, seals, and characters were written down in a slow, concentrated, and scrupulous way, which is like meditation, the everyday homework of Buddhist monks. The content is a diary.

On the other hand, these monotonous and “boring” lines replaced the variety and volatility of traditional lines. For Li, a line must be drawn straight and the dot neat, which runs counter to the traditional approaches of “the eighteen types of ink lines” (*shiba miao*) and various types of ink strokes. Traditional lines, especially those since the Yuan and Ming dynasties, are mostly for expressing temperament and tastes, but Li’s are arranged in an orderly, anonymous manner. They show rationality and order. Some of the spirituality has been solidified in them: a strict control of temperament and a dispelling of one’s expressiveness and personality. These lines do not try to express any elements of representation. Li avoids any expressive words, including adjectives like graceful, desolate, elegant, flavorful, and tonal.

Song Tao’s “Transmigration”

As a member of the “alternative generation,” Song Tao has demonstrated different characteristics from those of the previous artists. These new artists are concerned with the playful aspects of language in

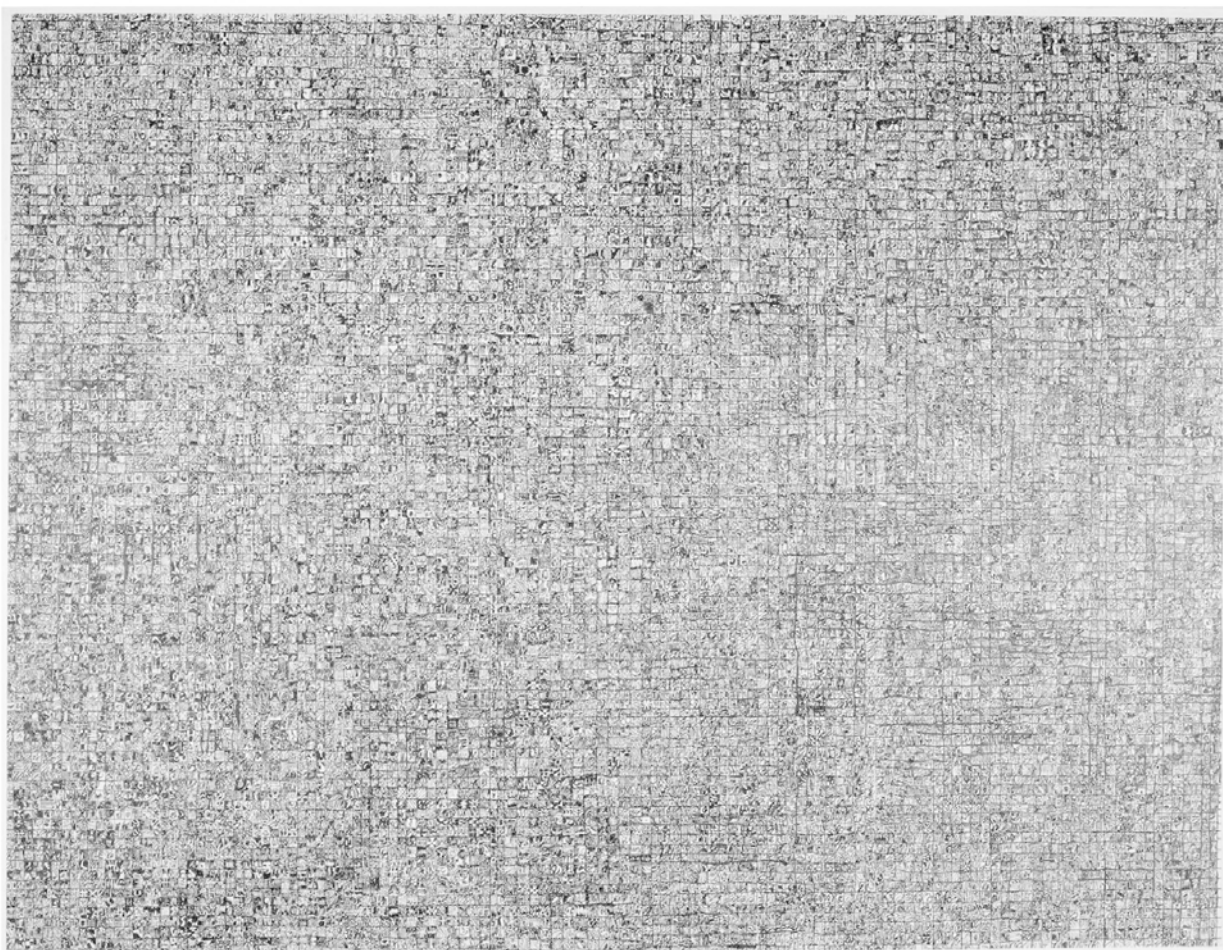


Figure 10.17

Li Huasheng, 1999.5–1999.7, 1999.

a work, rather than its social meaning. Therefore, their repetition is similar to the rhythm of electronic games, focusing on the even and mechanical aspects of rhythm, not unlike the sound of shooting. As this work is not dramatic and expressive but monotonous and indifferent, it appears more prosaic and innocent. It is not the prosaic and innocent style of the ancients, which tried to express a desolate and bleak feeling, but that of the modern phenomenon of cold-bloodedness. We could say that this cold innocence stems from a total indifference toward the “prosaic and innocent.” Song Tao, in his video work *It Is a Fine Day; That Explains Why It Does Not Rain*, records a very insignificant and even nonsensical matter: he finds a pulling ring from the top of a pop can, then takes it back home and puts it in a wooden box, then puts it back in the street where he originally found it. Although this is not dramatic at all, and too prosaic to have any themes, I smell in it a sense of transmigration and the fatalism of the old Buddhist and Daoist traditions. Perhaps this group of artists, born at the end of the 1970s, was too familiar with the influx of new media into China while they led simple and dull lives, so their careless attitude naturally reveals a sense of fatalism and unfeeling.

What I refer to as the “social meaning” is not what Song strives for, because his works are the products of language. Language precedes taste. Another of Song’s works, *49,368 Square Millimeters*, shows the process delineating the notion that “the moment something is created, something is lost as well.” It seems to have been a process of transmigration as well. On blueprints for projects with elaborate squares, he used pen ink to cross out some squares while leaving others untouched, so that the black squares (painted) and remaining white squares (untouched) began to form patterns, similar to the mode of drawing geometric abstract paintings. When he had finished his abstract paintings on a blueprint, he started to smear over the blank squares on the painting until they all became black.

Ultimately, Song’s was a self-negating process, for each daubing of a square corrected and revised the previous aesthetic judgment. Each daubing was his aesthetic judgment, or the demonstration of his design consciousness, which was gradually negated, becoming the nothingness of the color black. As Song

put it, “the continuous aesthetic aspirations toward the surface composition result in the disappearance of the carriers of these aesthetic principles.”¹⁹ It was a cycle of “from nothingness to something” and “from something to nothingness,” and also a dialectical relationship between positive and negative. After recording this process by copying, Song made it into a book form for others to appreciate. In the meantime, he enlarged his copies and framed them in sixty separate abstract paintings for exhibition. As in *Pinching the Flesh* by Gu Dexin, recordings were made of the works of art to satisfy viewers’ desire to see, but the recordings are divorced from the immediacy of the artistic process, and as such they become empty shells of meaninglessness, in spite of their painting-like appearance.

Many contemporary Chinese artists may have been unconsciously influenced by the philosophy of transmigration. A good example would be Xu Bing’s very early work, his graduation project of 1986, *Five Series of Repetitions*. This work clearly demonstrated Xu’s significant concern with the process of dematerialization. In *Five Series of Repetitions*, each series employed the image of a very mundane scene in a farming village (for example, a view of a fishpond, a field of crops, or a vegetable patch). These images were each carved onto a single woodblock. In each series, after carving an image onto a woodblock, Xu would print each newly finished carving onto the same long scroll (see figure 7.10). The final effect was of a single composition forged from an intricate interlinking of discrete images. The work was executed in monochrome, with the tonalities graduating from dark to light, and then from light to dark. The first and last images, in fact, looked like the negative and positive images of a photograph.²⁰ *Five Series of Repetitions* subverted the traditional concept of printmaking, because the original woodblock no longer existed at the end of the piece’s creation. All that was left was a cycle: it was the first thing and also the last thing. The function of the woodblock as a means of printing and reproduction was erased, and the concept of originality was itself also erased. This demonstrated the concept of transmigration, which also appears in Song Tao’s work.

This kind of meditative process and dematerialization can also be found in the average

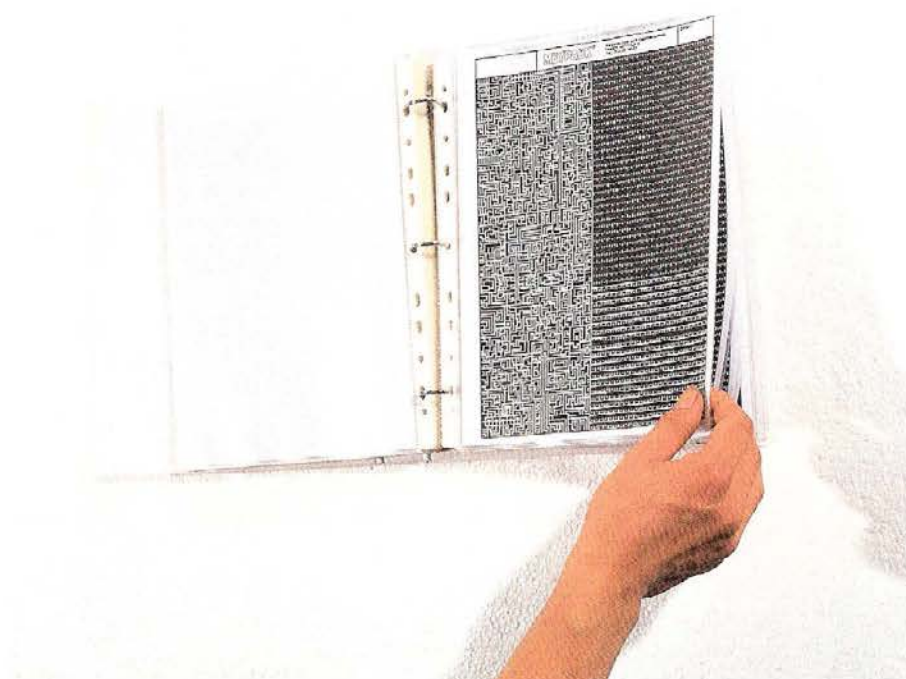
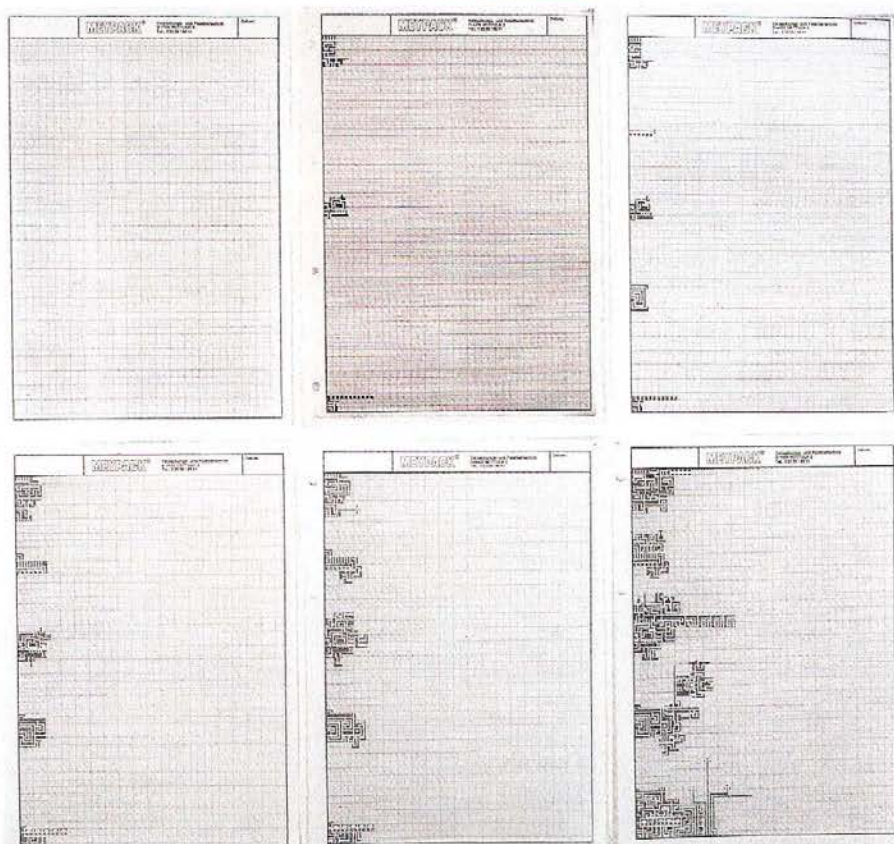
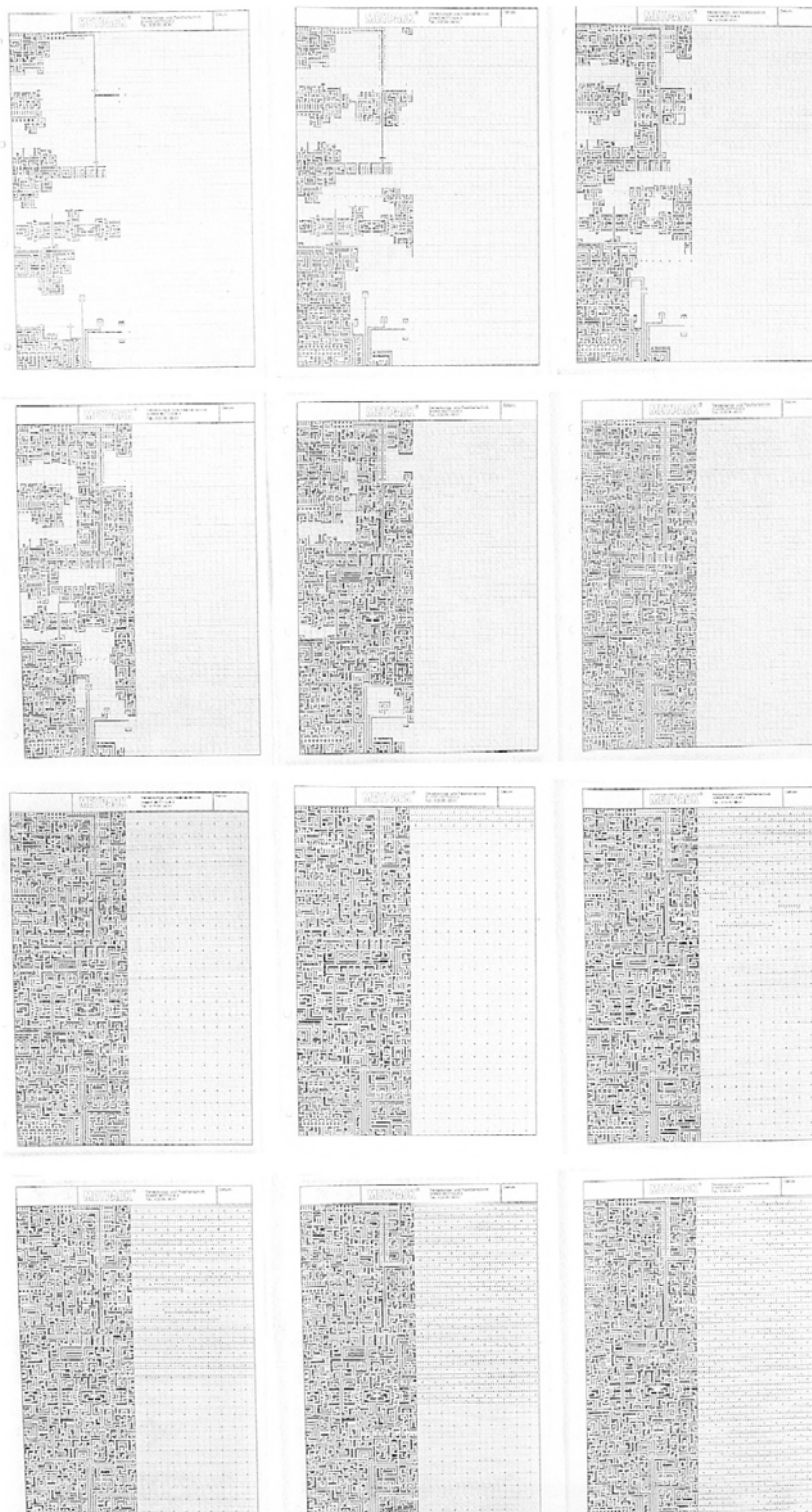


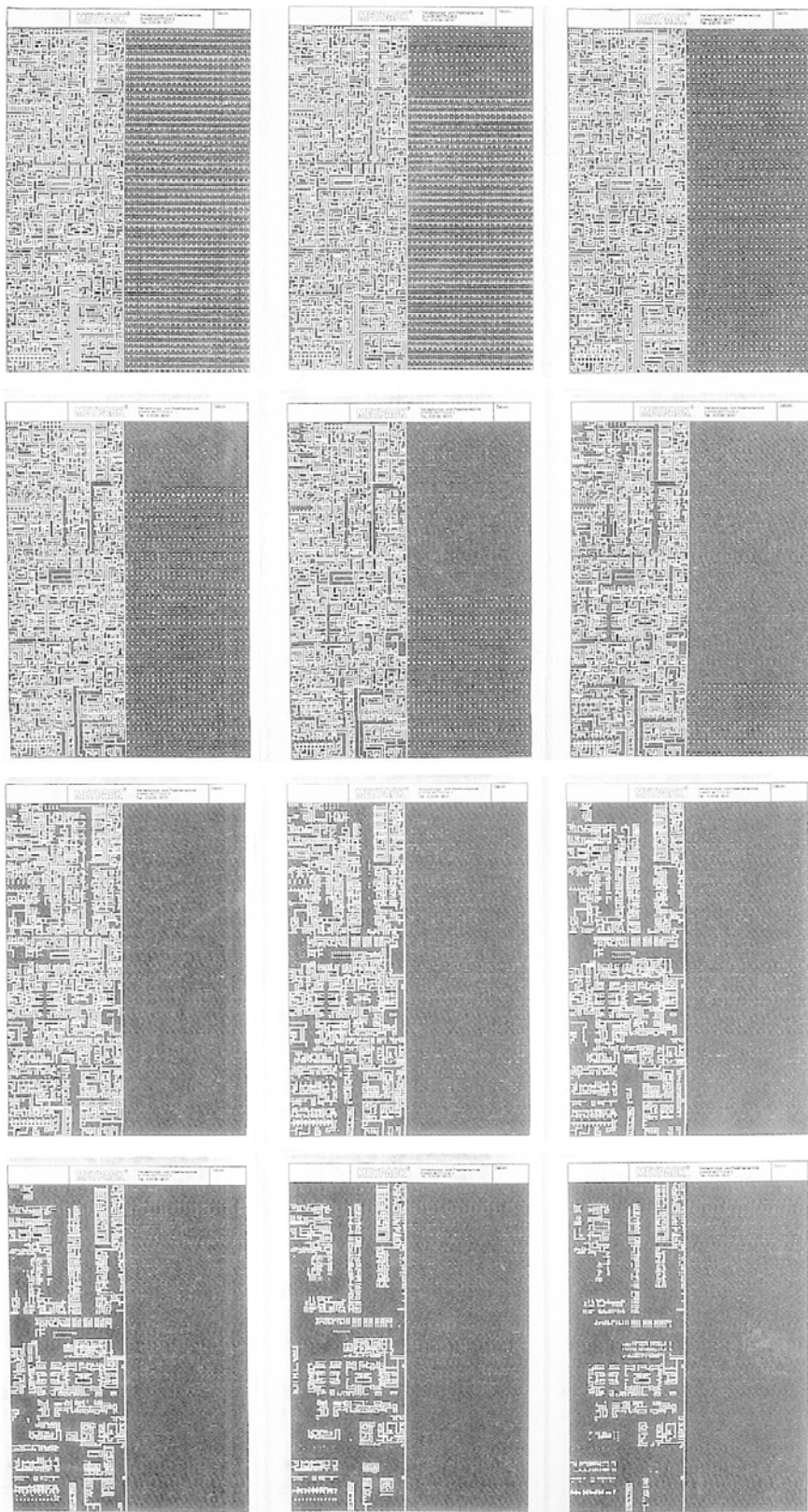
Figure 10.18 (through page 338)

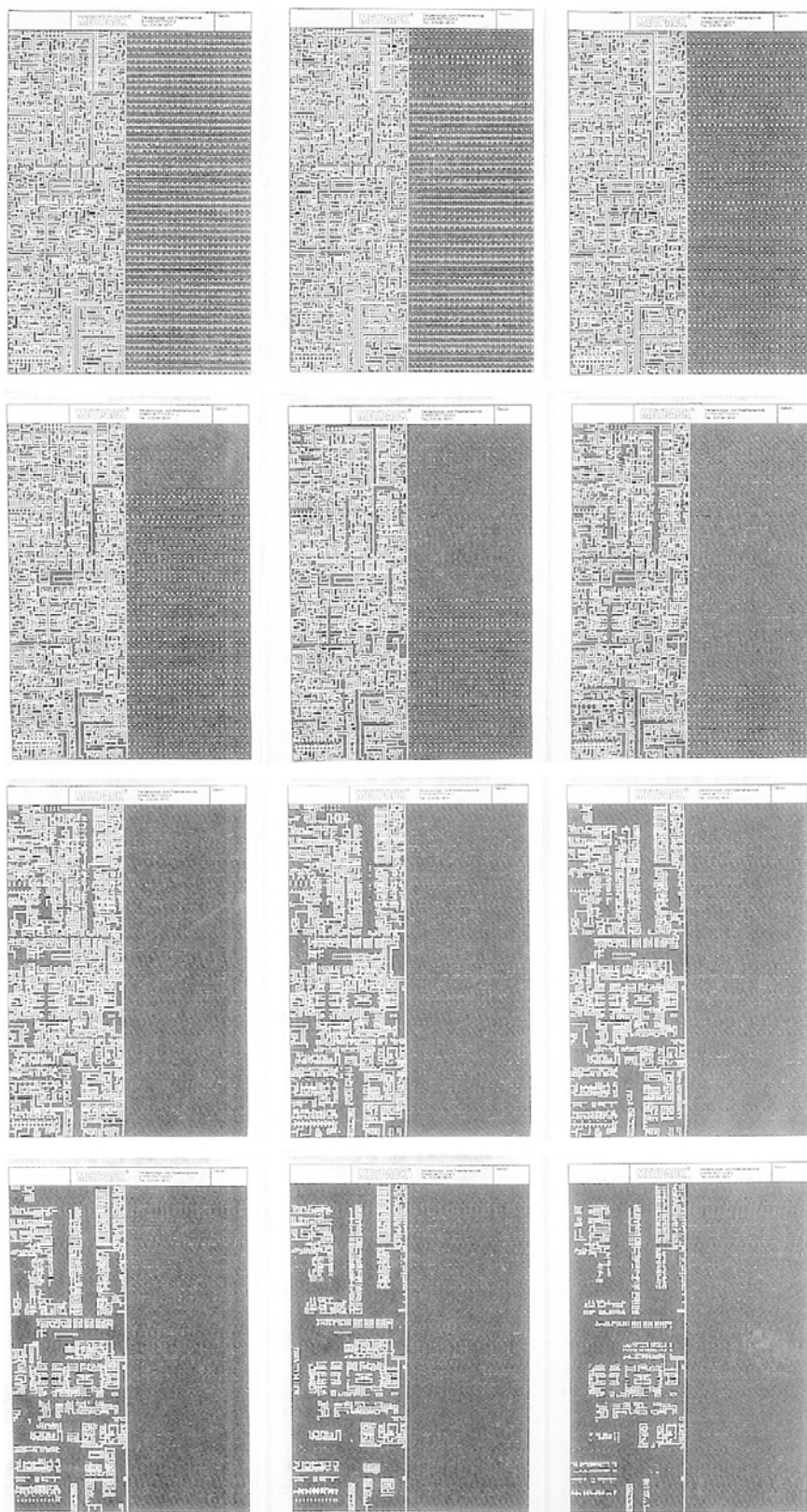
Song Tao, *49,368 Square Millimeters*, 2001.

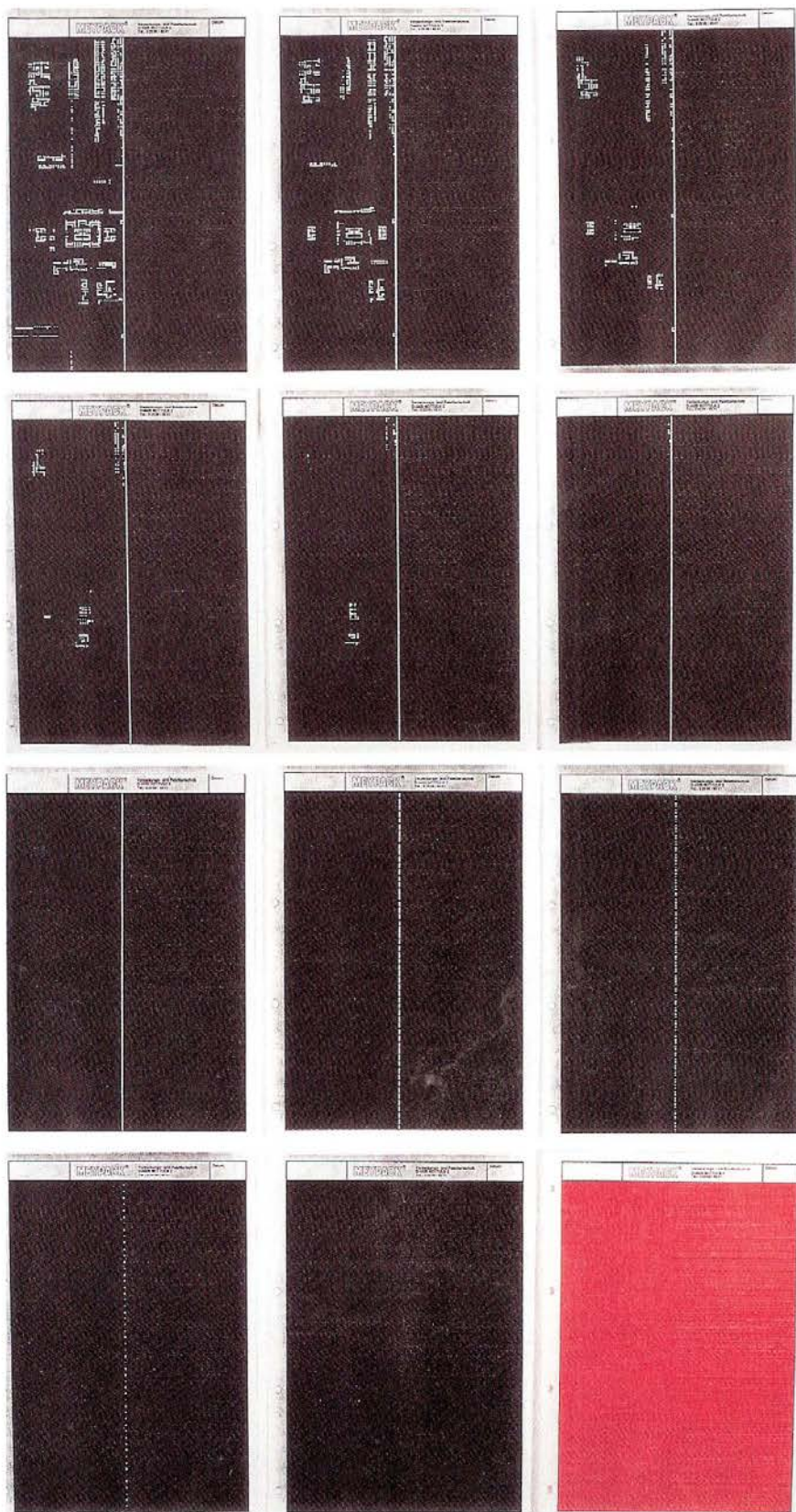












person's daily life. During the summer of 2002, in Shenyang, an industrial city in northeast China, I saw many retired older people and laid-off workers writing calligraphy on the smooth surfaces of the sidewalks and plazas, using big "brushes" that they had made themselves. They wrote characters in a fluent and elegant manner that soon vanished, as the "ink" they used was water. The only thing in their minds was meditation and the enjoyment of the writing process, with no motivation to make materialized artwork at all.



Figure 10.19

A lady writing calligraphy on the street in Shengyang,
Liaoning province, 2002.

Fixed Quantity and Infinity: The Fourth Aspect of Maximalism

Quantity and limitlessness, finite and infinite numbers, are mutually transformable and not fixed. In Buddhism, there are concepts of limitlessness that symbolize the Buddha's power, such as the ten thousand Buddhas, one thousand Buddhas, and the Buddha with one thousand hands and eyes. Perhaps when a number has reached a certain point it can no longer move forward and so is close to limitless, recalling the Chinese laudatory phrases "long life" (*wan sui*, literally "live ten thousand years"), or "longevity" (*wan shou wu jiang*, literally "live forever"). It is a unique character trait of the Chinese to link worldly practice and metaphysics—another type of maximalism. The methods and discourse of Chinese maximalism were developed to an extreme visual form in the so-called "red ocean" (*hong haiyang*) during the Cultural Revolution. As a part of his revolutionary discourse, Mao employed maximalist methods repeatedly in his poems and political slogans. The vision of Mao's political space must have inevitably influenced contemporary Chinese artists. Gigantic artworks, repetitive forms, and maximal quantities are frequently used by Chinese artists, though their thoughts and forms are not red anymore. For instance, think of Zhu Jinshi's rice paper installation and Lu Qing's long scroll painting. Zhu piled up tons of crumpled rice paper in his work, and Lu painted squares on the same scroll for a year.

The traditional resources of maximalism have also been employed by contemporary Chinese artists, either consciously or unconsciously. Repetition and fixed quantities are frequently found in their art. One example is Qiu Zhijie's *Copying the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" 1,000 Times*. Whether it is exactly one thousand times is as unimportant as whether there are really one thousand Buddha sculptures in the Thousand Buddha Grotto in the Dunhuang Caves. What counts is that it is a large number. Although maximalism denotes a general idea of great quantity, it actually treats specific quantity with great indifference. It strives for maximal and implies infinity. This phenomenon can also be found in daily life, for example in the *Itinerant Peddler* done by the Southern Song Dynasty artist Li Song. In the painting, the peddler's load is marked with the words *yibaijian* "one hundred commodities" to show the great quantity of his wares. In *A Dream Chronicle of Dong Jing* (*Dongji menghua lu*), written by Meng Yuanlao of the Southern Song Dynasty, more than one thousand kinds of commodities seen by the author at various shops were recorded in a flat and monotonous way. No descriptions were offered; only the names of the items were presented to the reader as a list. No wonder there were many monumental documentary works of art born in the same era, such as *The Spring Festival along the River* and *Landscape of Daunting Dimension*.



Figure 10.20
Zhu Jinshi, *Uncertain*, 1996.

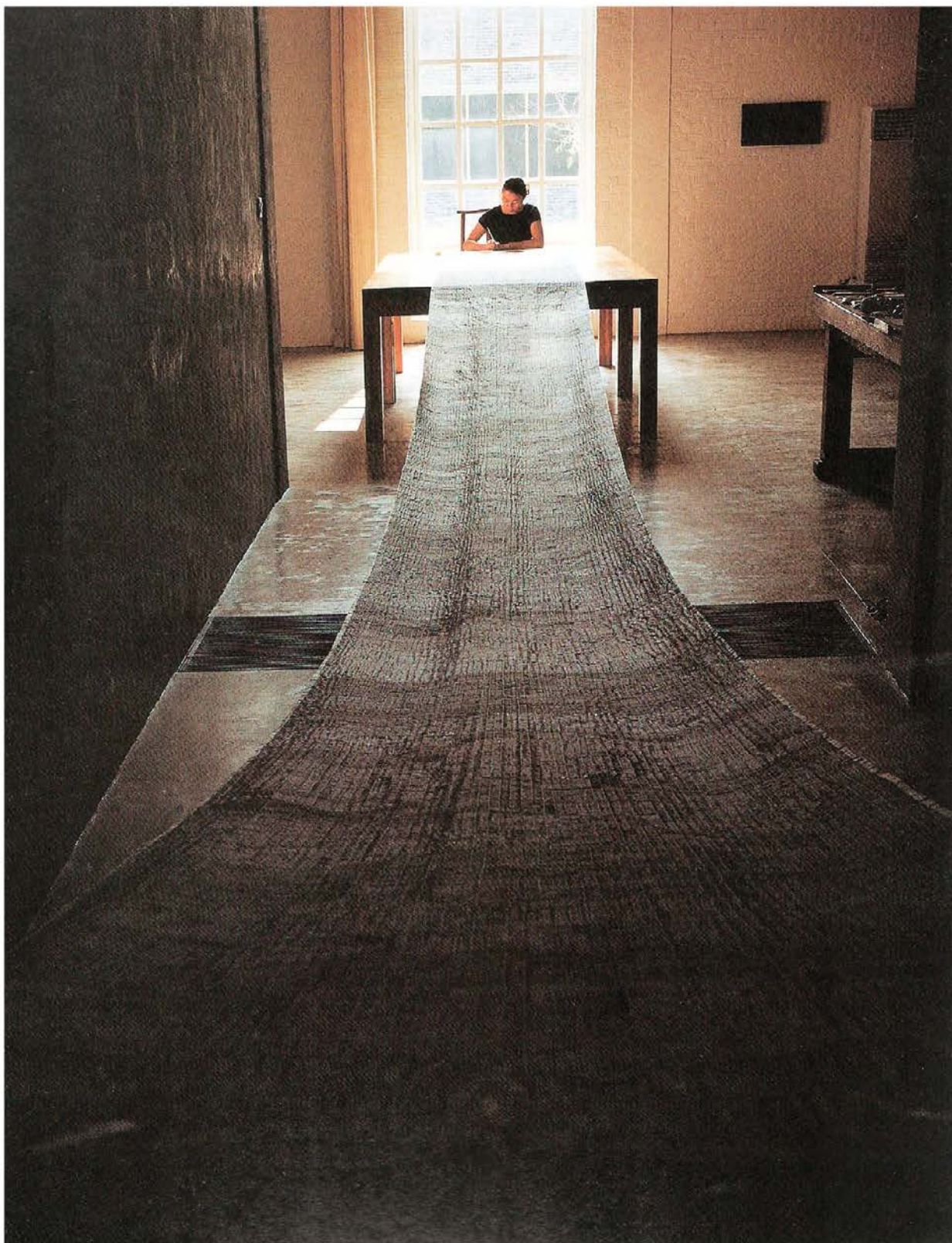


Figure 10.21
 Lu Qing, *Untitled*, 2000.

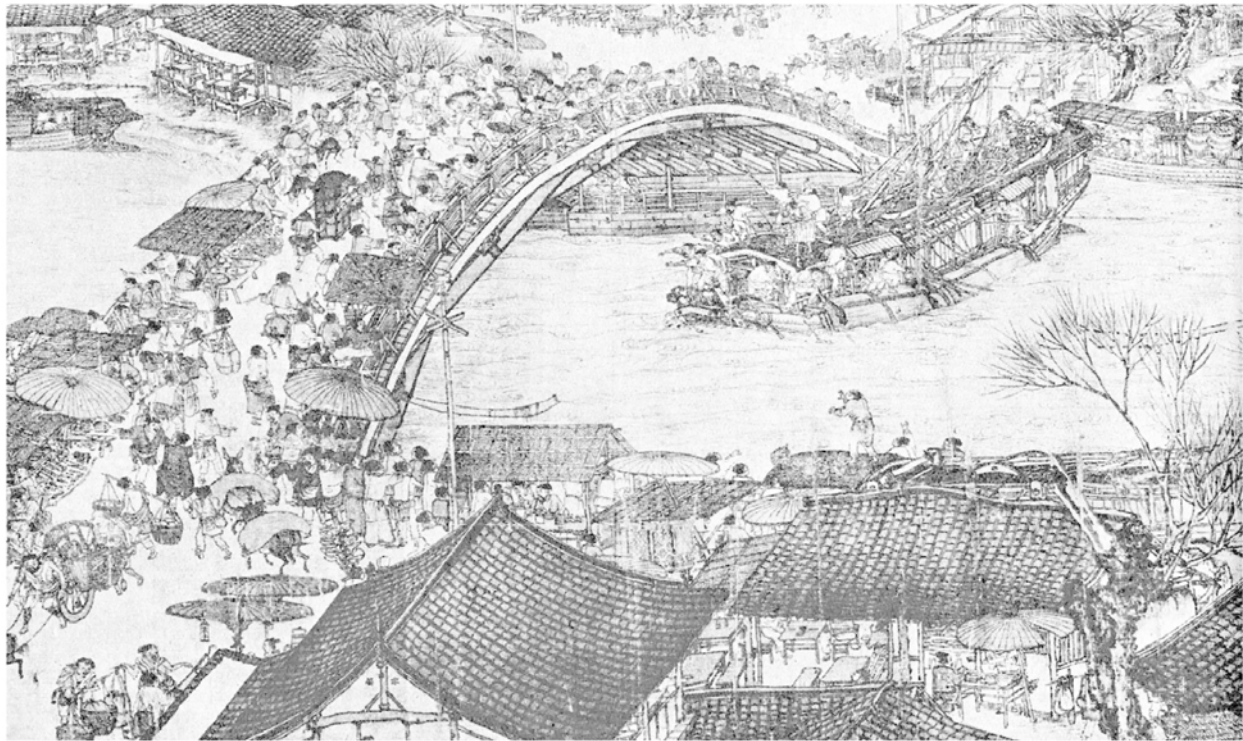


Figure 10.22

Zhang Zeduan, *The Spring Festival along the River*, Song Dynasty.

Artist Hong Hao created a modern version of *A Dream Chronicle of Dong Jing* using digital technology. Using a scanner, he entered into his computer images of all the articles that he used every day: toothpaste, Coca-Cola cans, bread, oil colors, cigarettes, pencils, his computer mouse, etc. Then he arranged these articles into a series of abstract images using computer design technology. From a distance, the images are obscure, with only arranged patterns remaining. Approached closely, they look like large numbers of thickly dotted and surrealistically painted articles. Hong called them “my possessions.” He was divorced from the feeling of using them when he scanned, stored, retrieved, and arranged these articles. These useful things had become an ocean of aesthetic objects, the constituent elements of which became the color fields and lines of artistic works. Breaking away from their utilitarian aspects (names, materials, functions, credit, values), each object was reduced to one of the undifferentiated hundreds or thousands of articles: the victims of maximalism. To the Chinese, the process of copying, manipulating, describing,

and counting these things is a kind of pleasure, a comprehension of the way of truth, or *wudao*.

This great relish of quantities and numbers can also be regarded as an expression of making a fetish of things. Chinese people are known for their fetishism. For example, Mi Fei addressed the Taihu Rocks as “brother rock,” and people in the Ming and Qing dynasties had a great fondness for things to do with the serving of tea. Some contemporary artists also take great pleasure in numbers. A case in point is Yang Zhenzhong’s video work *922 Grains of Rice*. The plot is extremely simple: a hen and a cock are pecking the rice with the voiceover of a man and a woman counting for the chickens (“One, two, three ...”) until all the grains of rice are completely eaten. The mechanical counting and the movements of the chickens provide the audience with some expectation of the ultimate numbers. As a chance number, 922 implies the absurd extension of numbers, not the choice of the artist. Accompanied by the happy rhythm of the pecking of the chickens, the artist shares the pleasure of the counting.



Figure 10.23
Hong Hao, *My Things No. 1-5*, 2001–2003.



Figure 10.24
Hong Hao, *My Things No. 1-5*, detail, 2001–2003.



Figure 10.25
 Yang Zhenzhong, stills from *922 Grains of Rice*, 2000.

Counting, however, can turn out to be extremely boring, particularly when applied to making artwork. At extremes, it leads neither to maximalism nor to infinity. On the contrary, it may lead to cynicism and nihilism. From the middle of the 1980s, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, two leaders of the '80s avant-garde art group called *Chishe* (Pool Society) of Hangzhou, had already started applying the fixed-quantity method in their creation of "gray humor" art. I use the term "gray humor" to define Zhang and Geng's art because they both commonly chose gray colors, or white-and-black color combinations, to make artworks that looked muted, insensitive, and cynical. Regardless of the specific significance of using different media, the general idea of the group of artists led by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi can be described in two major points.

First, they opposed the idea that art was intended to bring happiness and pleasure to the public; instead, they tried to find methods (such as painting styles, materials, and rules) to make the audience unhappy. Second, they recognized that most people, accustomed to being emotionless, preferred a life without vitality. Therefore, the Pool Society imitated insensitive reality with numb image types while using long, numbered lists of boring rules to stimulate the people through agitation. (See chapter 7.)

In that period, Zhang Peili painted a series of oil paintings called *X? Series* (*X? xilie*). The major images of the paintings were clinical chairs and gloves. He had written down the steps and orders he would strictly follow before he started to paint. He duplicated photographs of the chairs and surgical gloves in about one hundred works. The paintings were large oils in which many numbers marked on the canvas point to different parts of the gloves, suggesting a set of paint-by-numbers instructions (see figure 7.27). Zhang published these instructions in an article that also laid down strict conditions for the display and viewing of these artworks. Giving even harsher and more rigid rules governing the exhibition and viewing of artworks, Zhang created a project called *Art Plan #2* (*Yishujihua erhao*) in 1987. The plan was a twenty-eight-page list of instructions,

with eight parts describing different rules, for a total of 270 items. In each part of the plan, Zhang specified in minute and tedious detail the conditions under which people should be admitted to the art exhibition. Unsurprisingly, the plan has never become a reality.

Zhang and Geng continued making gray humor works in the 1990s. Their focus, however, changed from an elite desire to shock people to a hermetic sentiment of isolation from the outside world. From criticizing (or enlightening) the multitude's lack of emotion in the 1980s, they moved to mocking the excitement promoted by the institutionalized marketing system in the art world of the 1990s. The even more cynical approach of Geng Jianyi might be indicated in a statement he wrote in 1993: "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, like museums and art galleries that 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 the institution? And how is it that I want to be proclaimed the champ? It's really a shame."²¹

His new extreme direction can be found in his work of the past decade. In his photographic work *The Bright Side and Dark Side of a Face*, he measured the light and dark sides of faces of several people, and then used corresponding squares to identify the areas he calculated. Numbers, although not used in the images, served as the foundation of the artwork. This kind of measurement materialized the form of human portraits, just as we measure the area of a rock or weigh a piece of butter. In the same vein, the black-and-white faces are deprived of the gray part, which can best express the subtle feelings of a person. The audience is not reminded of anything by looking at the face; instead it's as though they are presented with an anatomical diagram. This approach of obstruction has been used by Geng since the 1980s. He likes to create an image to stop the expectation of meaning

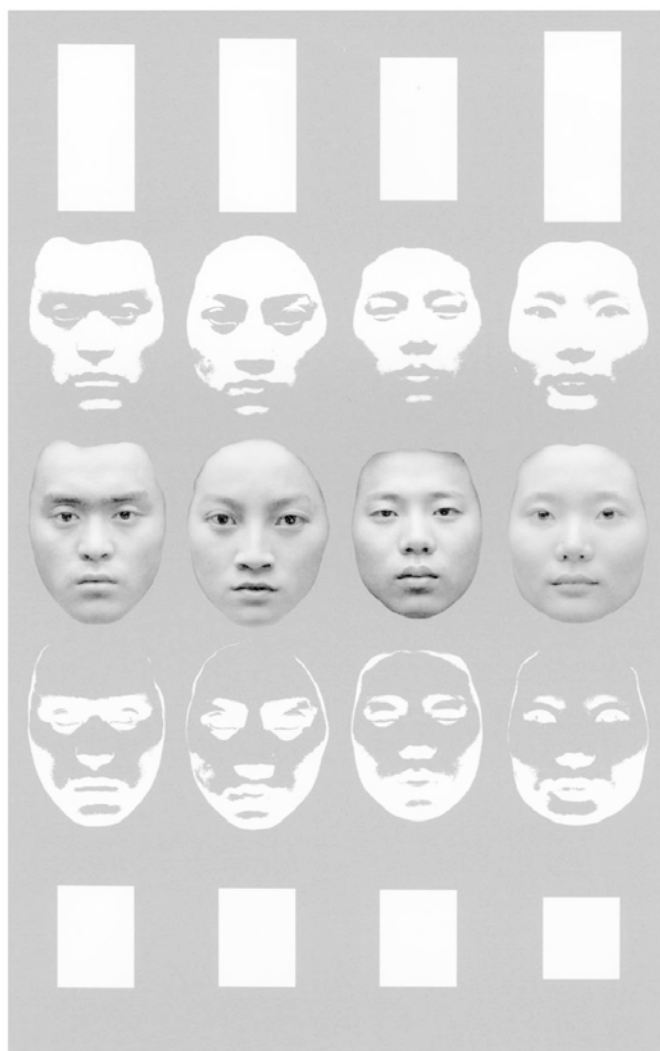
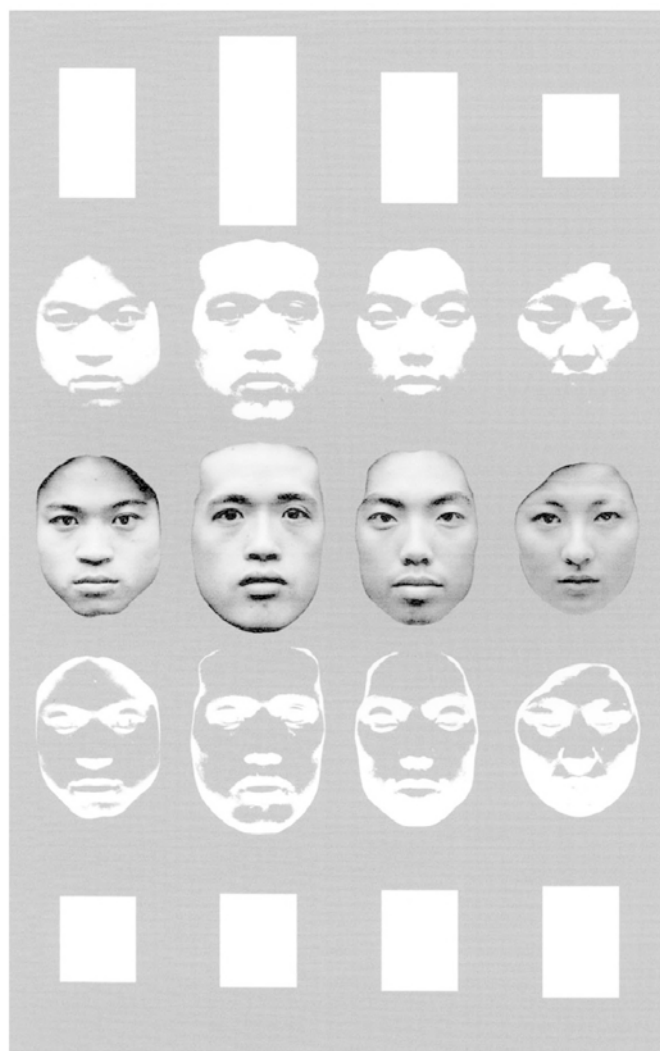


Figure 10.26

Geng Jianyi, *The Bright Side and Dark Side of a Face*, 2000.



or the visual satisfaction of the viewers. For Geng, the most important thing is what kind of pitfall to set up, which needs specific language for each different artistic backdrop. For example, *The Bright Side and Dark Side of a Face* uses area as a language to oppose the vogue of “emotional overflow.” The same principle was used by Geng in another work titled *How Could a “ ” Character Be Enough?* This title will at once remind Chinese viewers of certain moods, such as the mood expressed in Li Qingzhao’s poem “The Word ‘Worry’ Is Not Enough.” However, what Geng did was extremely boring: he inked out all the

words in a book except the word “of.” Afterward, he made a new book with pieces of white paper, based on the size of the first one. He put the word “of” in the new book in its original places, except that the words had been changed into squares. This silly, repetitious, and meaningless labor was a satirical attack on the inflammatory writings that use a great number of the word “of” or *de* to artificialize “feelings” and overinterpret “meanings” confined only within the scale of art objects themselves, without truly judging the reality and social context.

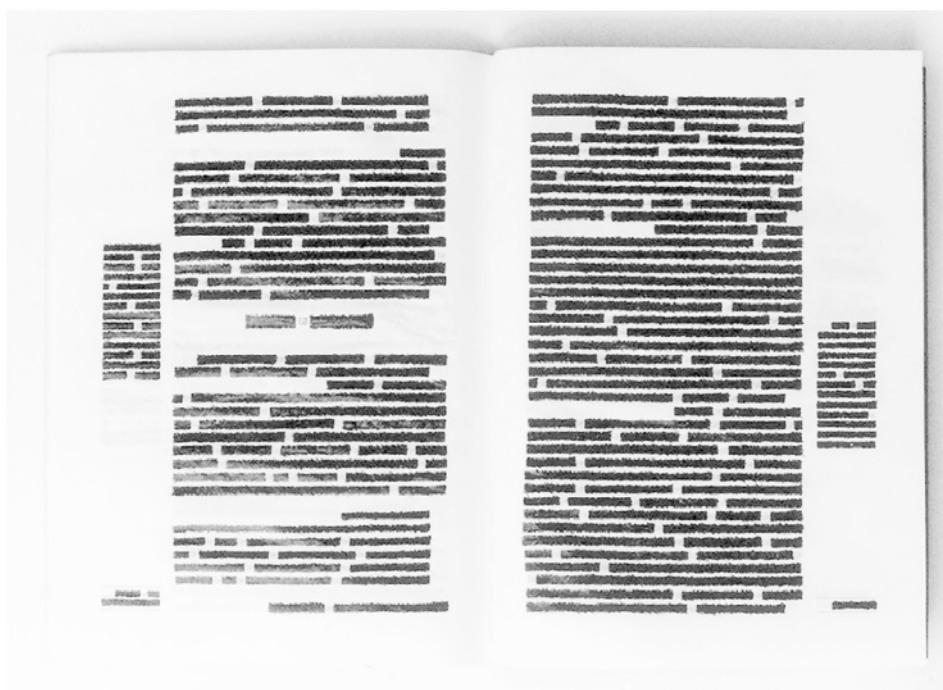


Figure 10.27

Geng Jianyi, *How Could a " " Character Be Enough?*, 1997–1998.

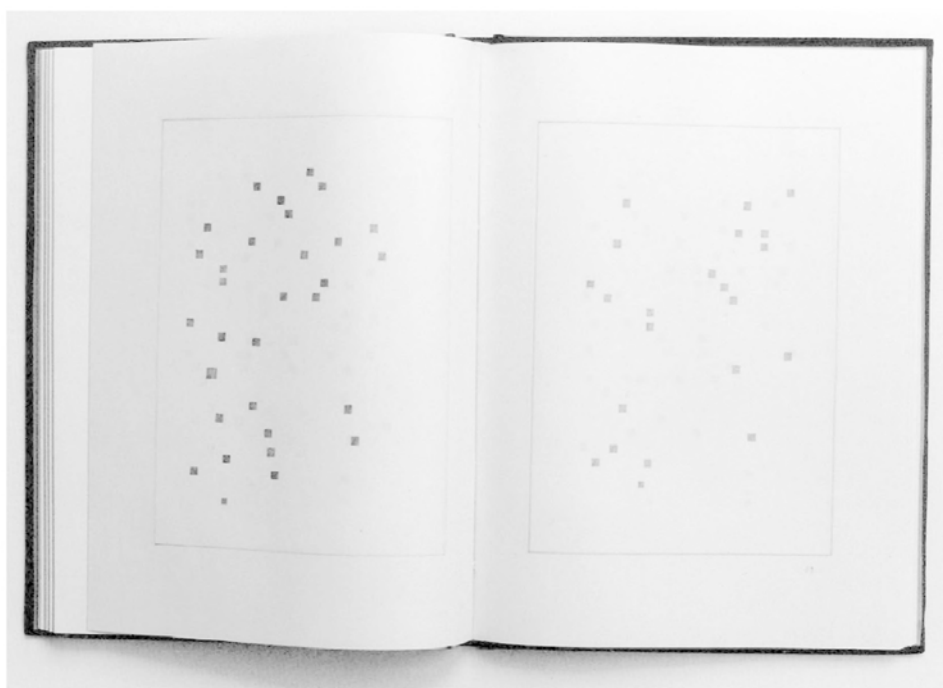


Figure 10.28

Geng Jianyi, *How Could a " " Character Be Enough?*, 1997–1998.

Maximalism—A Metropolitan Chan Buddhism? The Fifth Aspect of Maximalism

From what we have illustrated above, we know that maximalism has a close affinity with Buddhism, because the principle of the separation of work and its meaning is very similar to the “not writing words” doctrine of the Chan sect. Maximalism stipulates that meaning lies only in the personal experience, which is the same as the intuitive mysticism of meditation. It also believes that truth is nihilistic and meaning is groundless. This is exactly the ontological nihilism of Southern Chan Buddhism that says “Bodhi trees have no substantial bodies, and a dressing table is immaterial.” Maximalism believes that the meaning of truth is always changeable, and that it is not grandiose but similar to daily life. Therefore, maximalists regard their creation as repetitious labor and production, which embraces the real meanings involved. This is very similar to the ideas of the Confucian school of idealist philosophy of the Southern Song Dynasty put forward by Zhu Xi after he had absorbed the theory of Buddhism; he said: “Sweeping and cleaning the courtyard all contain truth” (*sasao yingdui jieshi ge li*). Often, the theory of maximalism is in agreement with the life principle of the artist. It advocates a peaceful frame of mind, lack of desire, and it aspires to an almost trivial life and a tranquil nature. It urges people to avoid boastful and inflammatory tendencies and extravagance. It is true that many artists of this school keep themselves away from the metropolitan mainstream and what is in vogue, and are quietly engaged in their own labor. As a mental place, therefore, maximalism can be recognized as a way in which individuals can peacefully coexist with common urban life, with no anxiety in isolation or self-exile. For example, Geng Jianyi, Gu Dexin, and Zhu Xiaohe of the old generation do not hanker after fame and fortune, instead leading ascetic lives.

The Representation of Chan Thinking in Lei Hong's Drawing

Still, the artists of maximalism are seriously concerned with the integrity of artistic creativity and human daily life. They believe that art is not a vehicle to express something, but rather a part of life. It is not

that they deliberately try to reach into the realm of truth by making their art into meditation, but that the “truth” or “Chan Buddhist significance” (*chanyi*) is reflected in their works in a natural way as the works are bounded with their daily life. This is especially shown in Lei Hong's works.

Lei graduated from the Sculpture Department of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art, so painting is only his sideline, but I think his paintings really manifest his religious aspirations. He has drawn thousands of pencil sketches, which, being composed of dots, lines, and squares, exhibit characteristics similar to some abstract paintings of the West. However, in his works it is very hard to identify any of the rational structural elements present in most Western abstract paintings. Instead, his works reveal a sense of life and the spirit of humanism, for those signs of dots and lines are not created out of concepts but of imagery. In a sense they are like Chinese traditional ink paintings, which never carried abstraction to an extreme point of conceptuality. Looking at Lei Hong's drawings, one might be reminded of a line of wild geese, people chanting on a returning fishing boat at dusk, or lonely smoke in the great desert. The interrelation between parts, the direction of movement, and the intensity of the signs in Lei's work seem to suggest a narrative, revealing the process of imaginary creative vision while also expressing the feelings of a single person at a certain moment. Lei's perseverance is closely related to his personal experiences. He was mistakenly diagnosed with cancer in 1993, which dealt him a heavy blow, pushing him into nihilism and forging his determination to explore extreme forms of consciousness. In the dead of night, for nights on end, he would devote himself to working on sketches that were extremely simple and orderly but filled with much of his energy and excitement. We can see in his works how his impulses and passion are controlled and regulated through rational forms. This passion stems from his sudden grasp of a “momentary eternity,” and “it is a completeness, a transcendence, and it entails entering into a religious state to have been able to express it.”²² He was often compelled to sleep during the day due to extreme fatigue. This reminds me of Malevich's suprematism, in which he imbued his black and red squares with his contemplation of the universe and mankind.

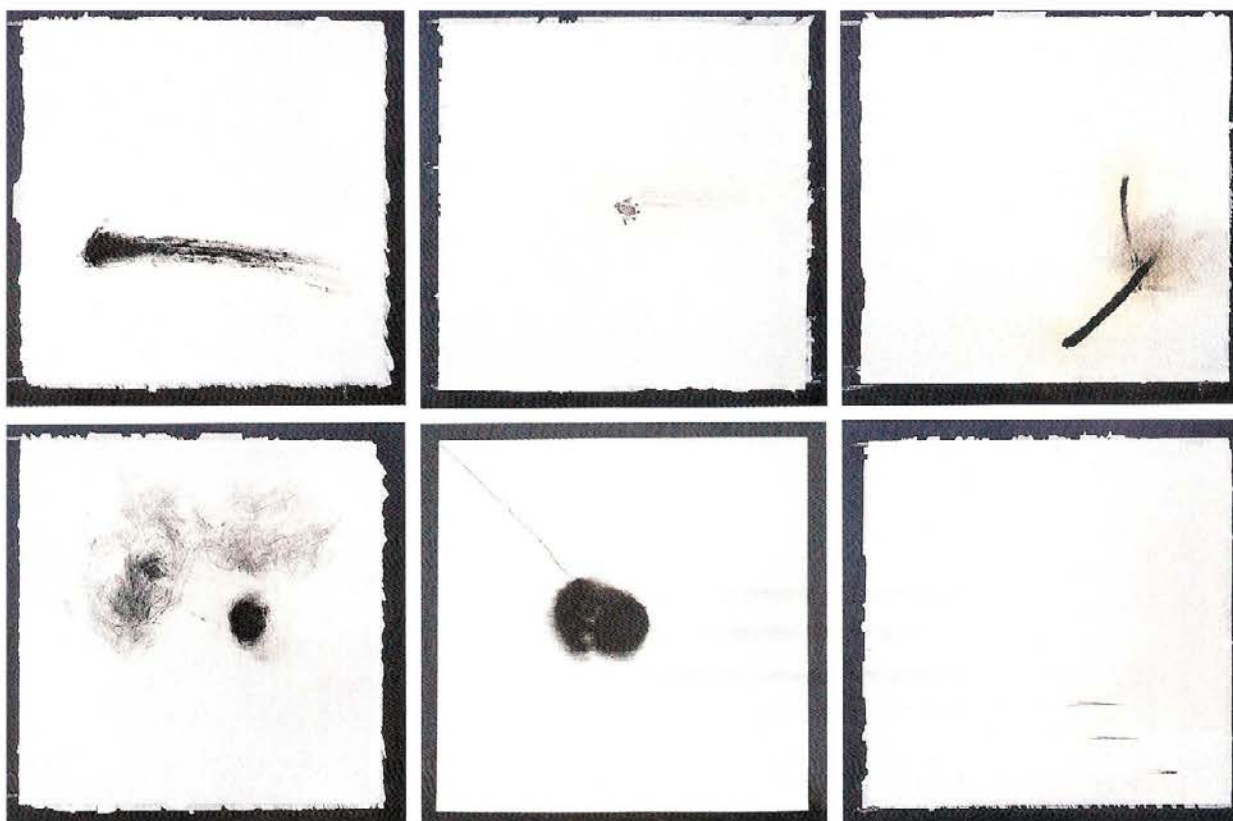


Figure 10.29

Lei Hong, *Absolution Series*, 2001–2002.

However, Lei's simple and metaphysical paintings are more like the personal writing of a deep meditation, and as such are a different metaphysical operation from that of Zhu Xiaohe. Unlike Malevich, who transforms an ultimate ideal into a stable and single abstract form, Lei seeks an ever-changing momentary eternity. This eternity is a highly personal experience, not related to any given principle or theory. That is why he likes the repetitive approach of traditional art, because repetition enables him to endlessly catch a fleeting eternity. As a result, Lei's spiritual representation is separated, fragmentary, chainlike, and repetitive. One cannot appreciate his constantly presented but never fixed spirit unless one has gone over the complete set of his works.

Zhang Yu's Fingerprints

Zhang Yu is another example of this metropolitan Chan meditation. Zhang began his experimental ink painting in the late 1980s. His background is quite similar to that of Li Huasheng, for both Zhang and Li converted to avant-garde ink painting from the

traditional literati style. Zhang Yu has been involved in the experimental ink movement (*shiyuan shuimo*) as a major founder and organizer since the early 1990s. This movement can be regarded as a continuity of the "universal current" ink group of the '85 Movement represented by Gu Wenda, Ren Jian, and others discussed in chapter 5. Both of the ink movements pursued idealism by finding a balance between the contemplative practice of traditional literati ink painting and contemporary meditation. The difference between the two avant-garde inks, however, is that the meditation of the 1980s avant-garde ink sought a universal cultural sublime corresponding with the particular noncommercial artistic environment, while the 1990s experimental ink took a low-key attitude concentrating on personal meditation in response to the materialized metropolitan surroundings. Many artists from apartment art and maximalism have been involved in kinds of daily material-touch activity. Zhang's fingerprinting is one of these.

In the early 1990s, Zhang Yu abandoned the pursuit by many modern Chinese ink painters of a "renaissance of brush and ink" (*bimo fuxing*),

a modern dream that attempted to modernize traditional painting, in particular the literati self-expressive style of the late dynasties, although Zhang came from this tradition in his early training. This dream has made a *bimo* myth that has trapped the minds of contemporary ink painters, for they have paid great attention to the transmutation of traditional literati painting with newly discovered, unique brushstrokes and ink wash techniques: what many scholars have termed the *xin wenrenhua* (new literati painting) of the twentieth century.

From the point of view of this *bimo* myth, Zhang Yu's work may lack brush value, because he avoids attracting the viewer by leaving any stylish personal brushstroke (*cun*) on paper. On the contrary, he always paints his strokes in similar shape and same size, or simply repeatedly presses his finger on rice paper.

It took Zhang Yu more than ten years to create his *Divine Light* (*Lingguang*) painting series, starting in the mid-1980s. The ultimate goal of the series was to construct a symbol, a sign, a mystery image of the primeval chaos and its divine light, rather than to engage in self-expression through the intimate, sensitive brushstroke. The universe his paintings touch and the technique Zhang employs, however, are deeply involved with Oriental philosophical sentiment. The universe is the origin of the world, and the numberless dots indicate Zhang's personal experience in configuring the symbol. Therefore, it is a balance as well as a unification between the world presented and the person presenting.

His recent *Fingerprint Series* (*Zhiyin xilie*) moves far beyond self-expression with its extreme inclination toward anti-brushwork, while the atmosphere of primeval chaos from the *Divine Light* still remains but with less symbolic touch and compositional end.

Zhang began his *Fingerprint Series* as early as 1991 while he was still making *Divine Light*. One may easily find connections between these early fingerprint paintings and the *Divine Light* series for their similarities in composition. Since 2003, Zhang has completely shifted his interest from *Divine Light* to the *Fingerprint Series*. The focus of the latter is no longer a unified symbolic sphere, rather randomness of fingerprints.

Since antiquity, a fingerprint has been a form of personal identification as well as a contractual

confirmation. The unique pattern of a fingerprint is considered a materialization of an individual identity. In Zhang Yu's painting, the fingerprint functions as a brushstroke, collectively forming a long scroll that takes him months to make. Zhang does not attempt to involve the beholder in either purely "seeing" the object or abstractly "thinking" about the composition of the work. One may feel touched by the touch of the finger when one experiences the tens of thousands of finger pressings. Every finger trace is transforming to another without a clear boundary. They are identical in physical appearance, and at the same time they are unique in meditative context.

All in all, we can say that maximalism is another "meditative" artistic phenomenon in the wake of the rationalist painting of the 1980s. We might say that these artists all belong to the category of meditative artistic practice because they all advocate going beyond reality, putting emphasis on conception and methodology, opposing self-expression, and fighting against simple and inflammatory self-expression. They are all elite artists. Nonetheless, unlike rationalist painting which aims at enlightening the masses, and thus elevates such spiritual sentiments as sublimity, transcendence, and edification, maximalism tries to separate from, avoid, and even cut itself off from the external world in order to gain access to meditative personal truths. It is thus an ivory tower artistic modality, a newly developing phenomenon in the contemporary Chinese art world. You can say that it is a silent, low-key attack on the corruption of market forces and their distortions of avant-garde art and the vulgar numbness of the masses, or an attitude of resistance to authority. No matter how we try to define its social significance, maximalism has never attempted to jump into the discursive system of social critique. Its main concern is about the artists themselves, living in a rapidly changing society. Its discourse is an alternative that aims neither for any "meaning" nor for a formalist object itself; maximalism seeks its own method and language. It does not aim at any metaphysical thinking itself, but turns daily life and art simple and tranquil, thus metaphysical; it is an allegory for the illusion of "meditative presence" which I define as *yi pai*.

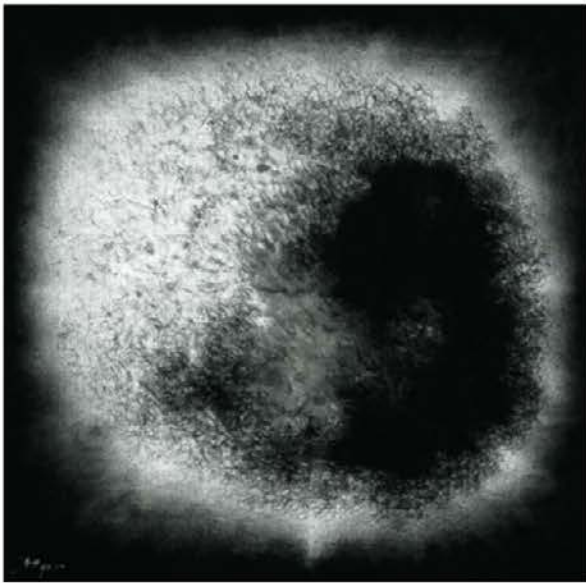


Figure 10.30
Zhang Yu, *Divine Light* series, no. 47, 1996.

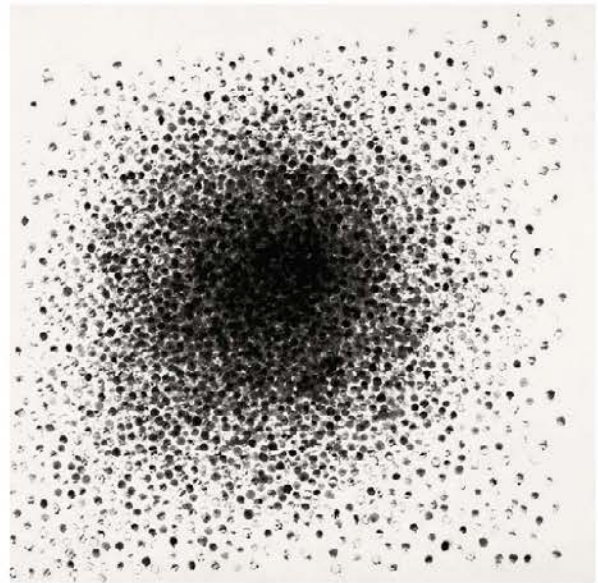


Figure 10.31
Zhang Yu, from the *Fingerprint Series*, 1997.

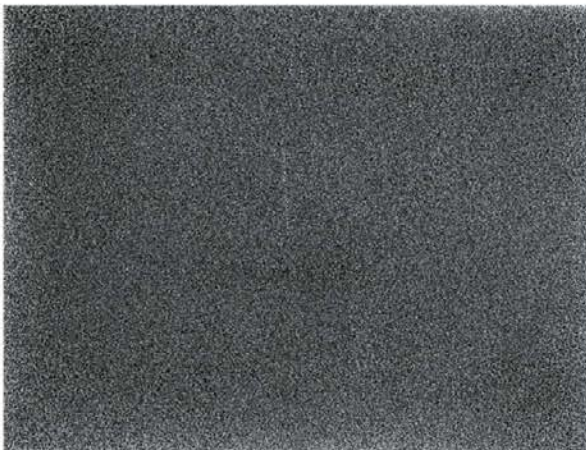


Figure 10.32
Zhang Yu, from the *Fingerprint Series*, 2004.



A Venn diagram consisting of three overlapping circles. The top circle is labeled 'Li principle'. The bottom-left circle is labeled 'Shi is in non-shi'. The bottom-right circle is labeled 'Xing appearance'. The intersection of the top and bottom-left circles is labeled 'Yi'. The intersection of the top and bottom-right circles is labeled 'Xing is in non-xing'. The intersection of the bottom-left and bottom-right circles is labeled 'Shi is in non-shi'. The central intersection of all three circles is labeled 'Xing appearance'.

Li
principle

*Xing is in
non-xing*

Yi

*Shi is in
non-shi*

*Xing
appearance*

Conclusion

I have drawn a picture of the historical logic of the Chinese total modernity project and the cultural avant-garde, from the synthetic desire (*zhongxi hebi*) in the early-twentieth-century avant-garde, to the political qualities of the “art for art’s sake” mentality in the amateur avant-garde in the post-Cultural Revolution period, to the anticonceptual attitude in Chinese “idea art” (*guannian*), as well as to the meditative practice (rather than formalistic and material concerns) in apartment art and maximalism. This whole picture, however, does not amount to merely addressing a phenomenological difference between Chinese modern art history and that of the West, nor do I attempt to deny the profound influence of Western modern civilization on Chinese art. What I specifically seek to address is a different mentality and approach to modernity in twentieth-century Chinese art, which has been shaped by, or has responded to, an inner cultural logic unique to the particular historical context of twentieth-century Chinese history. In this context, Western modernism and postmodernism have become two of the major reference points and resources for the Chinese cultural avant-garde as they generated a synthetic modernity while incorporating tradition. Nonetheless, as discussed above, conventional Western representational art, in particular the realistic style, has also become one of the major models for Chinese conservative, academic, as well as corrupted (either ideologically or commercially) avant-garde art. This realistic style may also be considered as a parallel model of modernity in the Chinese context. However, it has been generated by a philistine sociological view imbued with pragmatism on an ideological level which benefited Mao’s propaganda art project, then morphed into contemporary

academic art, and colored, as well, the short-lived projects of political pop and cynical realism.

One of the major functions of the Chinese avant-garde, therefore, is to formulate a critique of the two forms of kitsch (Mao’s kitsch and avant-garde kitsch), and this critique is similar to one Clement Greenberg indicated was present in the Western avant-garde half a century ago. The readers of this book may find that the amateur avant-garde in the post-Cultural Revolution period, the ’85 Movement in the 1980s, and apartment art and maximalism in the 1990s have taken this critical responsibility seriously. Meanwhile, the artists of the Chinese avant-garde also committed themselves to accomplishing a total modern cultural enlightenment (*wenhua yishi* in Chinese, meaning priority of cultural consciousness) through art-making, an enlightenment that is different from that of Western modernization, which many Western scholars (such as Max Weber) have well defined as including the autonomy of morality, science, and art.¹ The practice of the early-twentieth-century Chinese avant-garde initiated, and the ’85 Movement then reinitiated, this commitment to cultural modernity. It is a synthetic modernity with no splits between art, politics, and morality. It takes into consideration the Western model of modern enlightenment on the one hand, and modifies it by incorporating traditional Chinese synthetic models on the other. This is what the Chinese call the synthesis of China and the West (*zhongxi hebi*). The approach of *zhongxi hebi*, however, has been qualitatively and specifically differentiated in different periods.

The realist model of Chinese kitsch and the modernist model of the cultural avant-garde are both derived from the same philosophical thread of Western modernity, including a dichotomous