Introduction

For people from the West, it is very difficult to imagine that the meaning of modernity has been important for the Chinese, yet Chinese intellectuals have debated it, intensely, for more than a hundred years. Even at the dawn of the twenty-first century, amid rapid globalization, "modern" (*xiandai*) is still the preferred term, as is evident in phrases like "modern fashion" (*xiandai shishang*), "modern metropolis" (*xiandai dushi*), "modern style" (*xiandai fengmao*), and "modern design" (*xiandai sheji*). Of course, these designations all refer to the present moment of their utterance, and not to the modern era of Europe and the United States since the late eighteenth century, or to the time and taste of Western artistic modernism.

Meanwhile, contemporary Chinese also very frequently use the term "contemporaneity" (*dangdaixing*) as a synonym for "modernity." When we speak about Chinese contemporary art, the word "contemporary" refers to the past three decades of new artistic production, the years since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. When we speak of the "contemporaneity" of Chinese contemporary art, however, we are referring to the special markers that tie this art to the particular social and cultural environment of a specific period, or what modern Chinese call *shidai jingshen*, or "spirit of an epoch." In the indigenous Chinese context, this "spirit of an epoch" has often been regarded as the equivalent of "modernity" (*xiandaixing*) in the narrative of modern Chinese history.

This "modernity" should not be confused with "modernity" in the Euro-American sense of a marker of temporal logic (as part of a sequence from premodern to modern and then postmodern). Rather, it refers particularly to a specific time and a concrete space, and to the value choices of society at that time. This sense of the word had already emerged in the beginning of Chinese modern history, at the turn of the twentieth century. Since then, the consciousness of Chinese modernity has been determined by the condition of the nation. In my 1998 essay "Toward a Transnational Modernity," I put it this way: "For the Chinese, *modern* has meant a new nation rather than a new epoch. Thus, Chinese modernity is a consciousness of both transcendent time and reconstructed space with a clear national, cultural and political territorial boundary."[1]

In this introduction, I will first distinguish Chinese modernity from its Western referential origin, and argue that the fundamental characteristic of Chinese modernity can be interpreted as a permanent condition of contemporaneity, driven by a kind of empiricism, throughout modern Chinese history. In the second part, I will discuss how Chinese modernity has shaped the horizon of contemporary Chinese avant-garde art, locating it within a particular spatial perspective and experience. Throughout the discussion I will show that recognition of dislocation and displacement—in the sense of a merging of art and society by complex negotiations between various spaces—can be seen as an embodiment of the mixture of consciousness with imagination and cognition, as well as specific and concrete experiences of the avant-garde artists. This notion of "space" is essential for an understanding of Chinese modernity and the avant-garde in contemporary art.

Total Modernity in the Form of a Trinity

How can we distinguish Chinese modernity from Western modernity, which has influenced Chinese art since the early twentieth century? The difficulty, in

real cultural praxis, is that what we call the "essence" of Chinese modernity and the Western concept of modernity are, in fact, bound in a tension of acceptance and resistance, as well as a relation of dislocation. This difficulty, however, should not prevent us from searching for a closer narrative of Chinese modernity as differentiated from the Western concept. On the theoretical level, the best way to discover the "essence," or an accurate narrative of Chinese modernity, is to compare what is considered as modernity in the Chinese context with the contemporary theory of Western modernity.

As I understand it, there are two guiding principles in the Western theory of modernity. First, "modernity" is about a historical time and epoch, as Jürgen Habermas indicates.[2] It divides human history into premodern, modern, and postmodern epochs. Concepts such as "traditional" and "modern" are discursive structures that originated in the West during its period of modernization, where they were associated with "backwardness" and "progress," respectively. Using these categories, the history and art of Third World countries has been judged against the principle of Euro-American modernity and reduced to either old or new, past or future. As a result, negative judgments on modern and contemporary non-Western literature and art, based on this inequitable dichotomy, are ubiquitous in studies of these fields.[3]

The second principle is the theory of the two opposite modernities, which is based on a further dichotomy, that is, aesthetic modernity as set against the materialistic modernity of bourgeois society. This, too, is described by Habermas, and elaborated by Peter Bürger, Matei Calinescu, and other scholars.[4] In Euro-American modern art history, aesthetic modernity often appears as a manifestation of the criticism of the materialized modernity of capitalist society. The critical tendency of aesthetic modernity, however, can either move toward a pure aestheticizing material culture—what one may call "autonomous aestheticism," such as the formalism that the critic Clement Greenberg advocated—or it may move toward a critical, conceptualized material culture—what we may call "critical aestheticism," as embodied in the legacy of Marcel Duchamp and the conceptual art of the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore,

this split between two modernities is commonly recognized as a result of the original project of cultural modernization, which emerged during the French Enlightenment in the form of three autonomous spheres: science, morality, and art.[5]

These two principles have effectively shaped Western art history. They not only describe a logical progress of the historical line of Euro-American art history, but also fit the socioeconomic contexts of the transitional age from the early to the late modern period. The dichotomy-based theory of modernity in a capitalist culture has been adopted as an aesthetic foundation by revolutionary artists and critics during different periods: thus Baudelaire's consciousness of modern life in romanticism; Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of art's negativity relative to an all-pervasive cultural industry; Greenberg's aesthetic formalism; the counterinstitutional inquiry launched by conceptual art; the merging and confrontation of high and low culture in pop art; and the postmodernist theories of the cultural logic of late capitalist society advanced by Fredric Jameson and other scholars.

The model of periodization natural to Euro-American modernity may not fit the experience of most non-Western countries, and in particular Third World societies, which lack a clear historical line of progression from premodern to modern and postmodern. On the contrary, Third World societies have been obliged to merge characteristics of all these periods, adopting them in hybrid forms, and often using incompatible elements at the same time. These processes may also have been experienced differently in different nations, and shaped according to local priorities. In some societies, such as in China, modernization has lasted for a century; in others, such as in Malaysia, the term applies to only a few decades. Third World countries, therefore, have experienced modernity more through changes in their social environments and political spaces than through more abstract notions of time and epoch. Although certain terms, such as "new" and "modern," have repeatedly been used to discuss cultural phenomena in these regions, they tend to refer to the pursuit of a certain ideal environment within a Western referential model. In this situation, time and epoch are more flexible. In terms of the Euro-American epochal sequence, they can appear in reverse order. They are always ready to

be metaphorized along with the shaping of a specific social space at a particular time.

After the Cultural Revolution, for instance, when Chinese city construction began to reach its first phase of modernization, debate in the architectural field was not about modernism, but rather about postmodernism. Since the 1990s, however, due above all to rapid urbanization, these debates have shifted their attention to theories and controversies about modernity and modernism. In the former case, in a society suddenly opened up to the influence of Western contemporary theory, postmodernity was considered mostly as a set of concepts that served as the first step in a search for modernity.[6] In the latter case, modernity is being specified and merged into a true condition of Chinese urban construction in the current booming, globalized society.[7] This sequence-reversed epochal terminology suggests that the consciousness of time in China might always have been determined by the experience of a specific physical space and social environment. It is this experience that has made the consciousness of modernity in China, and perhaps in other Third World countries as well, more specific, empiricist, heightened, and thus problematic compared to the Euro-American historical chronology outlined above.

Rather than instituting a split between the different autonomous spheres—religion, politics, morality, and art—the mainstream of Chinese intellectual thinking in the modern and contemporary period tends to try to close the gap between different fields as well as between past and present. For instance, Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), an influential educator and philosopher of modern Chinese history, in his famous 1917 lecture "Replace Religion with Fine Art," advocated that aesthetics and art practice were equal in social importance to religion and commitment to morality.[8] Chinese modern and contemporary art is fundamentally concerned with how to integrate art and social projects, and how to fuse the benefits of a modern environment with a deeper understanding of current living space, in order to create a totality: a totality that can merge culture, aesthetics, and life as a whole.

The consciousness of modernity in China, therefore, has long been framed within what I call the project of "total modernity." This was, perhaps, best elaborated in the theory of Hu Shi, a leading figure of the New Cultural Movement of the early twentieth century, who transformed the principles of early-twentieth-century American pragmatism into the Chinese cultural context and combined them with traditional Confucian pragmatism. Influenced by Darwin's theory of "the survival of the fittest," Hu Shi once defined his new pragmatism as a principle of seeking truth in modern society. He noted, however, that "the truth is nothing more than a tool for dealing with the environment. As the environment changes, the truth changes with it. The real knowledge needed by humanity is not absolute principle and reason, but rather particular time, specific space, and the truth of mine."[9]

We could legitimately take Hu's notion of "particular time, specific space, and the truth of mine" as the principle of Chinese modernity in the form of a trinity, one that breaks down and transcends the dichotomy formation of Western modernity. This trinity, *qua* trinity, also subverts dichotomous thought patterns, such as subject versus object and time versus space, emphasizing instead a network of forever-changing relations between human subjectivity, living space, and experience. Furthermore, this trinity principle does not attempt to become a philosophical framework on a metaphysical level; rather, it is to be embodied in the experience of daily practice. That is to say, considered within the perspective of daily environment and a person's choice of truth and value, time is always a particular moment (not a linear, historical construct), and space is always ongoing, mutable, and actual. This pragmatic principle of daily experience is well illustrated in a socialist extremity by Deng Xiaoping's famous sayings, such as "Cross the river by jumping from stone to stone on the riverbed" (*mozhe shitou guohe*) and "White cat, black cat, as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat" (*bamao heimao, zhuazhu haozi jiushi haomao*). Both are metaphors of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which was the guiding principle of economic reform initiated in 1978. Perhaps these perceptions can also be seen as illustrations of Hu Shi's trinity theory of modernity. This principle of modernity has been adopted in Chinese political and cultural projects throughout

modern and contemporary history. Although history and art in China have changed rapidly since the early twentieth century, this heritage of pragmatism has consistently influenced contemporary Chinese art, including the avant-garde projects of the last three decades.

It is this total modernity with its trinity principle that forms the foundation of the Chinese avant-garde aesthetic, an aesthetic that cannot be separated from the political sphere. The political sphere, likewise, cannot be split from the aesthetic. Avant-garde aesthetic and avant-garde ideology have been embodied by a total spatial experience in which the consciousness of time ultimately serves space.

It is this total modernity that has established a permanent condition of "contemporaneity" as the Chinese model of "modernity." By being overwhelmingly concerned with space and environment during the last three decades, Chinese contemporary art has truly evidenced the principle of total modernity. The consciousness of space in Chinese contemporary art, I have claimed, has been driven by a kind of empiricism embedded in the experience of location and dislocation and the placement and displacement of various spatial references, rather than simply by dichotomies such as internal versus external, local versus international, import versus export, and so forth. In the second part of this introduction, I will develop my argument by discussing some specific art phenomena, such as the Chinese avant-garde, urban spectacle, maximalism—a kind of "abstract" art—and Chinese women's art as examples of these changes.

Avant-Garde Space

Although the avant-garde as an energizing force in Western art died during the 1970s, and the concept of avant-gardism fell into disrepute (not least among artists), it has subsequently flourished in China. This is one reason why the Chinese avant-garde needs to be discussed from the perspective of Chinese social and artistic space, where a specific, local avant-garde consciousness has been embodied, rather than from the viewpoint of the Western ideology of modernism and its material culture. It is the attempts by Chinese artists to close the gulf between art and real space, rather than merely represent consciousness in materialized aesthetic space (for example, in artworks), that establishes a fundamental difference between Chinese avant-garde activity and its Euro-American counterpart.

In the past three decades, the space for Chinese avant-garde art has undergone a tremendous transformation.[10] The initial loosening of ideological taboos at the end of the 1970s, the cultural expansion of the 1980s, and the economic and market globalization since the 1990s have all exerted influences on the space for Chinese avant-garde art. The "space" in question refers not only to exhibition space but also to the space for art production, including artists' studios, as well as to conceptual space in the form of interaction among artists and between artists and their audiences. As such, the rapid economic and political changes in the last three decades saw a correspondingly rapid change in Chinese avant-garde space from the 1970s painting society (*huahui*), to the 1980s art group (*qunti*), to the 1990s artists' village (*huajiacun*), and finally to the art district (*yishuqu*), which has emerged in big cities from late 1990s to the present.

Moreover, the space of the Chinese avant-garde refers not only to the occupation of working spaces by artists, but also to the conceptual space delineated by the political, academic, and commercial systems. To examine the space for Chinese avant-garde art practice is to explore not only the avant-garde ideology, but also its aesthetic.

For instance, during the Cultural Revolution, the No Name, a self-organized avant-garde group, went into self-exile from political life by portraying a utopian world in their landscape life drawings. Their impressionist/traditional literati style, in particular drawing on traditional landscape painting, combined with their claim of "art for art's sake," has apparently nothing to do with the aesthetic autonomy portrayed by the Western avant-garde as a mode of rebellion against bourgeois society. Rather, the existence of their "pure art" was in itself a political phenomenon during the Cultural Revolution.[11] The other example is apartment art, which emerged in the first half of the 1990s and demonstrated an aesthetic of randomness and simplicity in the form of small-scale installations commonly made of domestic materials. This daily-

life, experiential art practice reveals an avant-garde ideology in its response to the particular social space of the early 1990s, when the avant-garde retreated from public space to domestic space under political pressure from the authorities, on the one hand, and political pop and cynical realism became popular in the international market and museum space, on the other. Therefore, the aesthetic of apartment art can be seen as a social critique against both the authorities and the corrupted avant-garde itself.

The development of Chinese avant-garde art has been linked to the political climate from the very start. Art spaces were transformed into political realms, especially before the mid-1990s. Furthermore, avant-garde ideology has also led to confrontation in the public sphere. The avant-garde of the 1980s was equipped with many different resources, including Western modern and postmodern art movements such as Dada, surrealism, German expressionism, and pop, and mixed with traditional philosophy, such as Chan (Zen) Buddhism, as well as Mao's revolutionary heritage, in particular proletarian antagonistic sentiment and utopianism. Needless to say, all of these resources carry strong iconoclastic attitudes toward the existing orthodoxy. In contrast, autonomous aesthetic tendencies, such as cubism, constructivism, fauvism, and American abstract expressionism, have rarely influenced Chinese contemporary art since the Chinese art world opened to the West in the late 1970s. Instead, Dadaism, surrealism, and pop, which embodied the other tendency of critical aestheticism in twentieth-century Western art, have profoundly influenced Chinese avant-garde art.

The sphere of avant-garde art is impossible to nail down, drifting as it does between art space and sociopolitical space, the official and the unofficial, the aboveground and the underground. Art has always existed in opposition to and in negotiation with social space. As a result, avant-garde art has not always moved ahead, but has retreated as well. Many exhibitions or projects have begun only to be shut down in no time, or have caused political controversy, thus converting an art event into a political affair, an art space into a political space. Two such transformations took place at the Stars exhibition in 1979 and the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in 1989.[12]

Nevertheless, in China the avant-garde's perception of and attitude toward the relationships between art and the exogenous social sphere have undergone different stages of change in the last two decades. In general, avant-garde artists began to move into the public sphere before the 1990s but drew back during the 1990s, especially in the early part of the decade. Since 2000, the division between art and political space has slowly blurred, except in the case of certain extremely sensitive political issues and performance art. Moreover, the art world has become more diversified: where once it included only state museums, academies, and journals, it now encompasses a range of national, private, commercial, and academic institutions. This has multiplied the possibilities for artists, but the borders have thus become more ambiguous and flexible.

It is this complex double or multiple social system that makes it more difficult to make a judgment on what is a true Chinese avant-garde in the current China. Today the notion of "avant-garde" no longer relies on style or theme, nor on what one may claim in one's content or images; rather a true avant-garde is an intellectual position from which one is able to comment independently, that serves neither the state nor the market. This might suggest the third space of Homi Bhabha's cultural theory; but it is an avant-garde identity particular to Chinese globalizing society at the turn of the twenty-first century. It no longer follows the pattern that Peter Bürger and other scholars have pointed out, developing from a historical avant-garde (or radical avant-garde) to a neo avant-garde, with the neo-avant-garde abandoning the antagonism of the radical avant-garde and committing to a masquerade strategy, to playing the institution as social critique against capitalism. This principle, apparently, can't serve the Chinese avant-garde context, in which to be avant-garde means neither to be radical nor compromised toward one's system, but is about how to survive in between and still maintain intellectual and critical standards.

Avant-Garde Aesthetics in the Chinese Context

Although the Chinese avant-garde has been profoundly characterized by social engagement, it cannot be regarded as a pure political avant-garde without its

own aesthetic motivation, or as a secondary branch of a linear evolution of the Western avant-garde and contemporary art. On the contrary, the Chinese avant-garde in the last three decades has been engaged in a project of total modernity. Such a project was initiated in the early twentieth century and continues to bridge the gulf between art and society. The ideology and aesthetic of the Chinese avant-garde as a total project cannot be separated into the notions of an aesthetic avant-garde and a social (or political) avant-garde, as we find in the study of the Western avant-garde. It is the peculiar social and artistic context as well as the aesthetic resources that the Chinese avant-garde adopted that have framed the discourse.

Some Western scholars consider the Western avant-garde to be the experiment of aesthetic modernity that resulted from artists seeing themselves as alienated. The theory of alienation in capitalist society—initiated by Marxists, and developed by existentialists—has frequently been applied by Western scholars to characterize modernist artists, especially avant-gardists, as a rebellious, decadent, and resistant minority set against a capitalist society. Renato Poggioli paid particular attention to Marx's idea of alienation and considered "avant-gardism as ideology and as an aesthetic myth."[13] He traced the origin of the Western avant-garde to mid-nineteenth-century romanticism. Unlike Poggioli, Clement Greenberg saw the contribution of the twentieth-century avant-garde (with its innovation of a nonrepresentational linguistic system) as an outcome of the French Enlightenment, a human evolution in visual language. Another important contribution to the theory of the avant-garde was Bürger's critique of aesthetic autonomy that tried to relocate the Western avant-garde within the historical development of institutions in capitalist society.[14] Rather than considering the avant-garde an ideological force resulting from alienation, Bürger realized that the avant-garde was itself part of the institutional framework of capitalism, and that its revolutionary rule had been the critique of institutionality as such. The contribution of the avant-gardists, therefore, was to turn the critique of institutions, especially that of Art, into the primary content of their artworks. Furthermore, works of the avant-garde, such as Duchamp's *Fountain*, cannot be regarded as objects representative of an outside world; they themselves are part of the institutionalized system. Bürger thus attempted to bridge the gap between aesthetic autonomy (aesthetic modernity) and capitalist society (social modernity) by bonding them together as a part of the institutional structure in capitalist societies.

This theory of the institution, it seems to me, comes from the notion of the "social base" in Marx's theory. There, the social base in most situations is held to determine the form of whatever superstructure is built on it. Although Bürger's theory attempted to transcend the dichotomy of modernity and the avant-garde, his consideration of institutions as the social base was still confined within the framework of aesthetic modernity versus capitalist modernity. The relation between changing institutions and the avant-garde as discussed in his book was not, in fact, an engagement of the avant-gardists with the institutional system as it operated in real social space. Rather, the artists still operated within an aesthetic space. The real world remained what he called "the object of investigation."[15] The difference between Bürger and Poggioli is that the former took as his point of departure the latter's elaboration of avant-garde ideology in order to develop a more refined discourse of the universal aestheticism of the critical avant-garde. This difference, however, does not conceal the fact that both Bürger's and Poggioli's stances were based on the dichotomous theory of modernity and the avant-garde, and that both theories set up critical aestheticism against social modernity in capitalist societies.

It becomes unlikely, therefore, that either of these theories will work for the Chinese model of the avant-garde, because the Chinese institutional system has been constructed in a totally different way. In it, both socialist and capitalist forces are influential. In addition, there remain in Chinese society clear markers of cultural and political boundaries. This makes the living space of the avant-garde much more complex and multidimensional. It invites constant negotiation between avant-garde activities and the public sphere, often leading to confrontation and requiring a variety of strategies for actions in the public space, such as gestures of offense, followed by retreat and relocation.

We may consider the Chinese avant-garde movement of the 1980s and 1990s as a response to alienation, targeting not the vulgarity and philistinism of a consumer society, as did their Western counterparts, but rather the dominant, ideologically driven society as it became combined with the commercial imperatives. Chinese avant-garde artists have always embraced society when seeking individualism and creative freedom. There is no way for them to escape to an ivory tower; on the contrary, they must go onto the street and confront both the public and the authorities. By using the idea of "the shock of the new," an effective tool of Western avant-garde art for attacking the banal, vulgar taste of the middle class, Chinese avant-gardists also created some extremely violent works. They did so, however, not to attack the masses, but rather to provoke authority while trying to stimulate thought among the populace. One of the main features of the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s was the shunning of traditional studio work by artists who were focused instead on social projects taking place in the public sphere, such as villages, factories, streets, and plazas. This was a result of their idealism in seeking to enlighten the masses, their enjoyment of being involved in a movement, and a sensibility growing out of Mao's revolutionary legacy. However, this kind of idealism was partially determined by the social context of 1980s China, which lacked an art market, either local or international.

Despite the significant differences between the Western avant-garde and the '85 Movement in terms of their targets and their acceptance, we might still find many ideological similarities on the levels of abstract spirituality and basic attitudes of rebelliousness, as Poggioli described in his four-part typology of the Western avant-garde.[16] Even when the Chinese avant-garde retreated from public spaces in the early 1990s, their activities still demonstrated a peculiar avant-garde spatial motivation, which turned out to be a broad social and public matter, rather than a spatial concern of private life. Facing difficulties after the Tian'anmen Square incident and during the booming commercial society of the early 1990s—such as lack of acceptance of the avant-garde by both official and commercial galleries in China, being ignored by the media, lack of attention

from the organizers of some Chinese avant-garde exhibitions overseas, and a paucity of financial resources—conceptual artists have had to retreat to confined spaces. Many artists in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou have been forced to do their work at home; to employ inexpensive materials in small-scale works that can only be displayed in private spaces; and to communicate only with a small audience of artists and interested persons. I call this unique phenomenon apartment art (*gongyu yishu*), which has produced a number of unsellable and unexhibitable site-specific installations.[17] Song Dong and his wife Yin Xiuzhen, for instance, are Beijing-based artists who lived in a room some ten meters square. Many of their projects were made in this small room, most of them sketched on paper. One of Song's projects was to practice Chinese calligraphy every day on a chunk of ordinary stone or the surface of a table, using a traditional brush dipped in clear water rather than ink. After the water characters evaporated, he wrote again.

Some works of apartment art are called proposal art (*fangan yishu*). For example, an outdoor work or a large-scale installation might be presented as illustrated sketches. These proposals remain on paper and are never turned into reality. This avant-garde practice attempts to formulate a distinctive personal discourse in a polymorphous, polycentric world. It is a resistance of all totalizing ideologies in order to be free from any particular one. Yet this resistance is also a way of cultivating a private, meditative world apart from the materialistic society that has emerged since the early 1990s. Apartment art is, therefore, engaged in responding to the double kitsch of Chinese society—the previous ideological kitsch as well as the later commercial kitsch. One may think that this retreat is similar to the attitude of Western modernism in the first half of the twentieth century in the terms of its isolation from outside society. The motivation of artists of apartment art, however, is to use the materials selected from the surroundings of their own daily lives in order to represent the true relationship between the avant-garde art space and the social space in general. In this way, their unsellable and unexhibitable works mirror the social environment and constitute a close investigation of the society. The works by the artists of apartment

art are in this way the silent, personal materials that voice the condition of their "nonexistence" by way of self-dematerialization.

In 1990, Wang Peng and Feng Mengbo had a joint exhibition in the art gallery at the affiliated middle school of the Central Academy of Fine Art. Immediately before the opening, Wang Peng constructed a brick wall that sealed off the door to the gallery. The wall was meant to symbolize the self-confinement that separated the avant-garde from the official art system and market, a border behind which the artist had retreated.

It is this consciousness of environmental intervention rather than mere exploration of language or concept that has driven the new art movements of the last three decades toward an avant-garde tendency. Recently, some Chinese curators have tended to use the term "experimental art" (*shiyan yishu*) rather than "avant-garde" (either *qianwei* or *xianfeng*) to define contemporary Chinese art. This move may avoid the out-of-fashion usage of "avant-garde," or point to its dislocation in China today. Some may feel the term "avant-garde" to be too politically confrontational. Nevertheless, "experimental art," like "avant-garde," is itself a Western notion, widely adopted in the 1960s to refer to new art. I think the term "experimental art" cannot include most Chinese contemporary art phenomena of the last two decades, because, compared with "avant-garde," it sounds too passive and lacking in motivation and direction.

What is important is not the terminology of "experimentation," but rather its goal and significance. Of course, meaningful "experimentation" cannot limit itself merely to form and language, but must have embedded within it a concrete critique, whether linguistic or social, especially at the present moment, when, under the onslaught of globalization and systematization, the direction of Chinese contemporary art's experimentation is far from clear. In fact, the phrase "experimental art" was introduced in the early 1990s, appearing first in the *Timeline of Chinese Experimental Art*, edited by Feng Boyi and Qian Zhijian. Later, "avant-garde" and "experimental" art were used interchangeably by Chinese critics and curators in reference to new art.

"Experimental" is a term that seems more moderate and palatable than "avant-garde," while
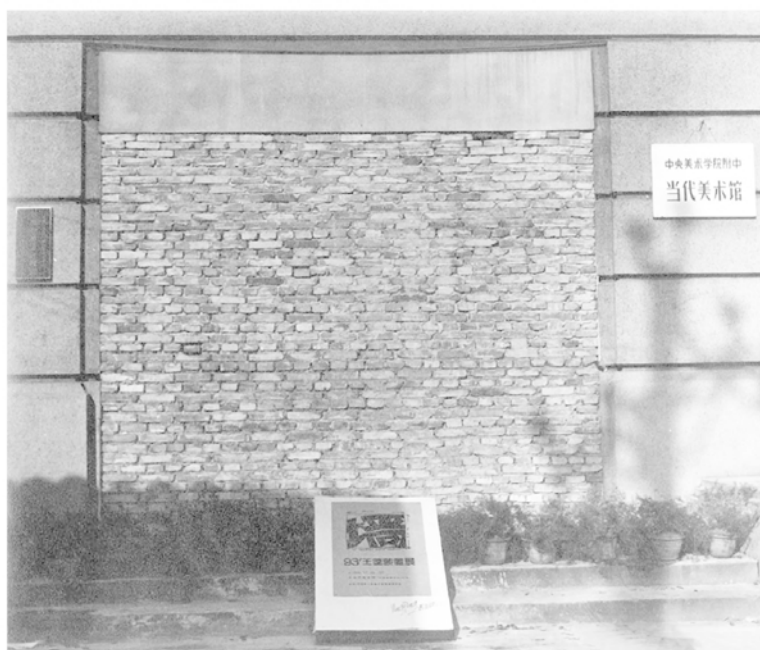

Figure 0.1

Wang Peng, *The Wall: 93 Installations Exhibition,* 1993.

still retaining the idea of seeking the new. Although it also has a sense of exploring boundaries and self-marginalization, the exact aims of "experimentation" remain unstated and opportunistic, because, from the very beginning, experimentation has a subjective sense of indeterminacy, as everything hangs on the result of the experiment itself. Experimentation depends on the chance unification of subjective and objective conditions. For that reason, it is flexible. And perhaps for this same reason, it was fitted to China's rapid and chaotic internationalization and reorientation to a market economy in the 1990s. Nonetheless, it is inappropriate to use the term "experimental art" in reference to the Chinese art of the late 1970s and 1980s. The term also seems less than perfectly suited to the "underground" phenomenon represented by apartment art during the early 1990s, and even less suited to the political pop, cynical realism, and New Generation painting schools, each of which had an obvious eye toward real life.

On the other hand, "avant-garde" seems better suited to highlight the "contemporaneity" of contemporary Chinese art. As I mentioned above, contemporaneity is not a term referring to a specific time, but rather means the "spirit of the time." Therefore, to be "avant-garde" is to make value choices, to adopt a specific critical direction. This critique integrates two inseparable tendencies: social critique and self-critique. Self-critique refers to the avant-garde's disillusionment with its own conservatism and corruption, and with the lifelessness of artistic language and methodology. Thus "avant-garde" has a built-in sense of critique and protest.

The various uses of the term "avant-garde" by Chinese artists over the last two decades have themselves already become a part of Chinese contemporary art history. Moreover, from the moment Chinese artists began using this term, its meaning was already different from the meaning derived from Euro-American modernism: the separation of aesthetics and politics implied by the Euro-American use of the term was replaced in China by a unity of the aesthetic and the social. The tag of "avant-garde" accurately described the position of Chinese artists in the social context of the 1980s and 1990s, when various post-isms (postsocialism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and postindustrialism) encountered one another in the same country, one that bore a long tradition. For the Chinese avant-garde, the "posts" mean nothing more than the end of the age, and therefore the task of the avant-garde still remains significant.

Postmodernism in Chinese Context

When Greenberg identified both Stalin's socialist realism and Hollywood commercial culture as "kitsch," and Picasso and modernist art as avant-garde, his judgment was based on the pattern of elite versus popular, and avant-garde versus market. Despite this, he was slightly hesitant to name Picasso and other modernist masters "avant-gardists," as there was always a danger of the avant-garde surrendering to the market. Postmodernism declines Greenberg's doctrine of modernism.

In assessing Chinese avant-garde and kitsch, however, there is, perhaps a dislocation between the Greenberg theory and postmodernist discourse. Political pop and the cynical realism of the 1990s are perfect examples. Stylistically, political pop and cynical realism are mixtures of Chinese socialist realism with American pop, similar in formulation to 1970s Russian sots art. Discursively, political pop and cynical realism are the products of internal political failure in Western postmodernist discourse. It was a short-lived avant-garde in its beginning, but soon became a deconstructive force that undermined everything, including Chinese intellectual discourse itself, which had been developed since the end of the Cultural Revolution with an independent, critical, idealist vision to search for Chinese modernity. Postmodernist discourse has dominated the most fashionable contemporary Chinese art in the market, galleries, and exhibitions in the West, as well as in the most popular gallery districts in China. As the revolutionary theoretical discourse in the West (at least in the 1980s), postmodernism and deconstruction have become, to a certain degree, corrupted forces inside of China. The voice of postmodernism against institutionalization has been prominent in the West since the 1970s, when, as I discussed in chapter 2 of *The Wall*, Chinese contemporary art reached the phase of what I call the "museum age," during which art was institutionalized by both the market and the

previous official museum system. Furthermore, one of the faces of postmodernism, in particular the theory of material culture and popular culture, has come to join the current market and urban materialism.

Therefore, the postmodernist discourse and deconstructionist theory that one may consider standards of Western intellectual perspective are questionable and problematic in current Chinese contemporary art discourse—both its art criticism and production. Furthermore, the dislocation and inversion of modernist-postmodernist discourse have also interfered with the narrative discourse of contemporary Chinese art.

Deconstructionism and postmodernism combined with various local styles have infiltrated Chinese visual art, as is evident in popular photography, film, and soap operas. Pastiche and kitsch (*yansu*) have become part of the dominant stylistic tendencies in visual art, not as a way to allegorize the cheap taste of popular culture in a critical way, but to please the exotic eyes of foreign dealers. While the imported discourse of postmodernism has dominated the narrative of contemporary Chinese art, certain types of visual art (which from a Western modernist point of view can be identified as "apolitical" or "aesthetic" art) have long been ignored or overshadowed by the mainstream art world. For instance, there have been many artists who have devoted themselves to a kind of Chinese abstract art since the late 1970s. At first glance, one may label it as either the continuity of early-twentieth-century Chinese modernism or as simply a copy of Western minimalism. After close study of this trend toward a "pure aesthetic," I have found it to be a complex and ambiguous phenomenon that cannot simply be defined as a Western type of modernist aesthetic, because it neither pursues a modernist utopia within a two-dimensional composition, nor conceptually overwrites the material's substance by insisting that "what you see is what you see," as Frank Stella said. Instead, it reveals the artist's personal state and everyday life in self-imposed exile.[18] One of the movements of this type emerged in the early 1990s and actively continues to the present. It can be seen as a close counterpart to apartment art, with a similar personal focus and meditation against both the political and materialized public environment. I have

named it maximalism and organized an exhibition that toured China and New York.[19]

The No Name group, an underground avant-garde group that dates back to the Cultural Revolution, also produced early examples of this type of art. These artists have been pursuing an ideal Chinese aestheticism in their impressionist/literati landscape paintings since the 1960s. The apolitical, "art for art's sake" appearance of No Name's works, however, was strikingly political under the domination of the Cultural Revolution's propagandist art.[20]

This "art for art's sake" appearance has been marginalized by the double eyes of the modernist-postmodernist discourse. Within modernism, one may see it as a purely aesthetic art, while from the postmodernist point of view it is an out-of-fashion modernist style. In this case, Chinese "aesthetic" art has always been positioned under the judgment of modernists (with an antithetical view of politics versus aesthetics) as an apolitical form considered insignificant in the current political circumstances in China, or under the judgment of postmodernists as insignificant "modern formalist play." I by no means wish to state, however, that the executors of the discourse all come from the West. Chinese critics, curators, and artists have also been involved in the play of the dislocation of modernist-postmodernist discourse.

Consequently, Chinese abstract art, experimental ink painting, and certain types of conceptual art, in particular some small-scale, unsellable, unexhibitable installation works, have been marginalized in both critical writing and the market. I would like to argue that it is this marginalized art that one may call contemporary Chinese "elite" art: art that has strived to maintain the independent stance of the intellectual in the currently institutionalized Chinese art world. Recently, there has been a growing interest in "aestheticism" in Beijing and Shanghai. Three major conferences with the topic of "Chinese aesthetic narrative" took place in 2006 and 2007.[21] Several exhibitions and publications on the same topic (or Chinese abstract art) have also come out in the last two years, including the exhibition "Ruins: Tan Ping and Zhu Jinshi" at the Today Art Museum; "Home: Bingyi and Leihong Recent Works" at the Sanshang Art Center; and "Visible/Invisible" at the
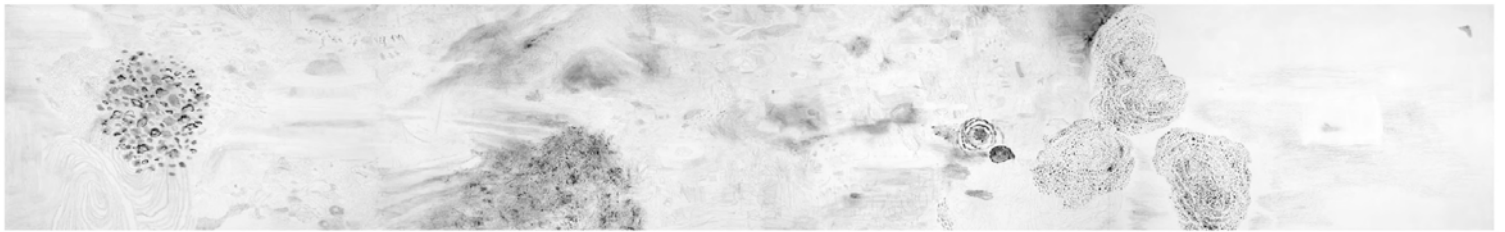
Figure 0.2

Huang Bingyi, *Thousand Li of Water and Mountains*, 2008.

One Moon Gallery. More events associated with this topic will take place in the next few years. This trend demonstrates a new tendency to attempt to resolve individual meditation, traditional lyrical styles, modern abstraction, and conceptual art together in a new discourse. This attention may not only open a new page of contemporary art history, but also stir a critique of the current Chinese type of postmodernist discourse.

This specific art tendency and this particular historical moment at the beginning of the twenty-first century may demonstrate another move toward what one may call the "meditation on Chineseness." It has been produced by the Chinese historical context as well as the international dialogue between East and West.

In recent years, an ahistorical view has been applied, by some, to the study of Chinese contemporary art. This is another outcome of certain postmodernist theories, such as deconstructionism. To look at contemporary Chinese art from this point of view is to find that everything is contingent, transient, and lacks historical logic. In the Chinese context, however, the historical view has always been considered an important perspective in the creation of the art of the day. Moreover, the consciousness of modernity has always brought historical memory into what I call the ritualized space in which the contemporary and the past meet through certain ceremonial or monumental environments created by Chinese artists. This can

be commonly found in the various contemporary art projects associated with historical architectural sites, such as the Great Wall, the Summer Palace, and Tian'anmen Square.

It has been very common in the last three decades for contemporary Chinese artists to turn historical sites into a symbolic medium in order to express modern Chinese identity. In the beginning of the new transitional era, there was an evident impulse to use historical sites. For example, around 1979 these sites emerged in the process of criticizing and reflecting upon the Cultural Revolution. As pursuing social modernization became the driving ideological force in Chinese society, the ruins of the Old Summer Palace destroyed by the Western "Joint Army of the Eight Powers" suddenly became the favorite hangout for young artists and scholars. Mourning the Old Summer Palace did not necessarily mean a longing for the old; rather, it revealed the artists' wish to excavate a new life for the nation and to achieve a Chinese modernity. The Old Summer Palace came to be a favorite topic among artists. For instance, *Newly Born*, an oil painting by Huang Rui, a member of the Stars group, strongly resonated with the public. Clearly, the meaning of his painting demonstrated a wish for the self-strengthening and rebirth of a China weakened by foreign invasion and civil turmoil (such as the Cultural Revolution). Kang Mu, Zhao Jianhai, and Sheng Qi conducted performances for the first time on the site of the Old Summer Palace in 1985,

Figure 0.3

Kang Mu, Zhao Jianhai, Sheng Qi, and others, *Spring*, 1985.

in which they bound up the old ruins. Their physical activities existed together with the historical existence of the edifice itself.

Many performance works and earthworks have taken place on the Great Wall in the last two decades. In fact, the meaning of the Great Wall has repeatedly been reconstructed and reinterpreted throughout the twentieth century. Consequently, this reinterpretation itself has been formulated as an unending "discourse of the Great Wall." It has become a process of shaping or reshaping the consciousness of Chinese identity. Almost all the performance pieces, earthworks, and installations of the Great Wall projects involved certain kinds of ceremonial form.[22] Through these ritualized acts, environments, historical ruins, and stages all became part of the "ritual site." The body of the artist became at once a symbol of the sacrificial in the past and of the living man mourning the sacrificial in the present. It is the contrast between historical memory and immediate feeling, the discrepancy between grand natural environment, historical background, and actual living situation, that causes disorder in the recognition of identities. Using a memorial

ceremony, a completely unreal situation and ritual, the artist can turn his factual identity into an unreal but nevertheless idealized and mystic identity. For example, he could call up a spirit such as a witch, or "die" on the battlefield like an ancient warrior, or wander around like a ghost or spirit, as in the 1988 performance of the Beijing-based group 21st Century and in Zheng Lianjie's earthworks and the performance called *Big Explosion*, which took place on the Great Wall in 1993. What the performance artist could become in the process of performing could be determined by his immediate spiritual purpose, by the sense of loss over his current identity, or by his longing for belonging (in class, national, community, and even sexual terms). Regardless of differences among the various projects associated with ritual form on the historical sites, they all demonstrated the application of historical myth as a force over certain modern myths.

There have been a variety of modern myths in China: ideological, cultural, national, and even some relating to gender. Most artists took their performance pieces or earthworks to the Great Wall in order to make social critiques in response to national symbols
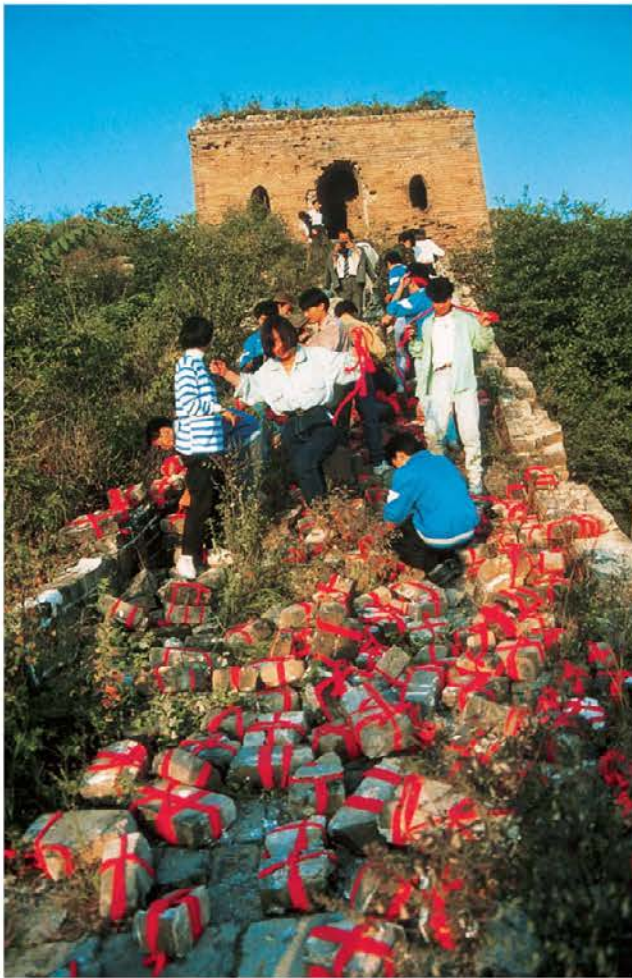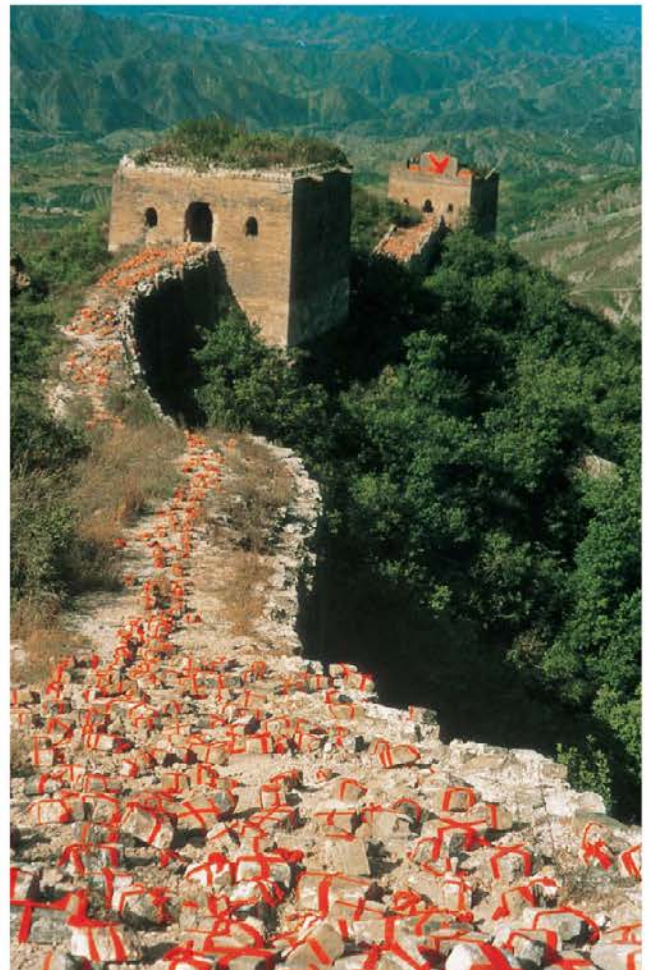
Figure 0.4

Zheng Lianjie, *Big Explosion Series,* 1993.

and state ideologies. These performances included Xu Bing's *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (1991) and Cai Guoqiang's *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Aliens No. 10* (1993). In contrast, He Chengyao, a Beijing-based woman artist, made her Wall performance very personal, bringing the site of the Wall into a gendered space in a very unusual way. On May 17, 2001, when the German artist H. A. Schult installed his one thousand "trash people" on the Great Wall at Jinshanling, displaying them like terra cotta soldiers, He Chengyao staged her performance *Opening the Great Wall*. She suddenly took off her red T-shirt, showing herself naked above the waist, a gesture that came from her mother's extreme behavior during her insanity. In the 1960s, He's parents were fired from their jobs because her mother had illegally become pregnant out of wedlock. Her mother subsequently suffered a mental breakdown. Day and night, stark naked, she ran shouting through the streets of her hometown.[23] Whereas other artists took their performances or earthworks to the sites of the Great Wall to comment on national ideology, He reconstructed the living space of her childhood under the spatial pressure of both the Wall and the terra cotta soldiers, seeing them as symbols of a male-dominated patriarchal society.[24] In this case, He undertook her ceremonial act of imitating the insanity of her mother in order to comment on the modern myth that has ruined Chinese women's identities and lives.

Zhan Wang's 1997 earthwork *Fixing the Golden Tooth for the Great Wall* provides an interpretation of the "restoration" of the old Wall in response to current globalization. Restoration of the Wall might symbolize restoration of the nation, as Deng advocated. Zhan Wang's restoration, however, is a mockery, because restoration of the nation, in the current Chinese modernization and globalization, remains mainly material rather than a restoration of the spirit. In this work, the artist used hand-welded steel sheets to make "golden bricks," which he then used to "fix" the missing parapets in a section of the Wall located in a rural area of Beijing, west of Badaling. After climbing over two hills, the artist discovered a portion of the Wall where two parapets, spanning a distance of twenty meters, were missing. Careful calculation indicated that in order to fix this section, more than

Figure 0.5

Cai Guoqiang, *Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters: Project for Aliens No. 10*, 1993.
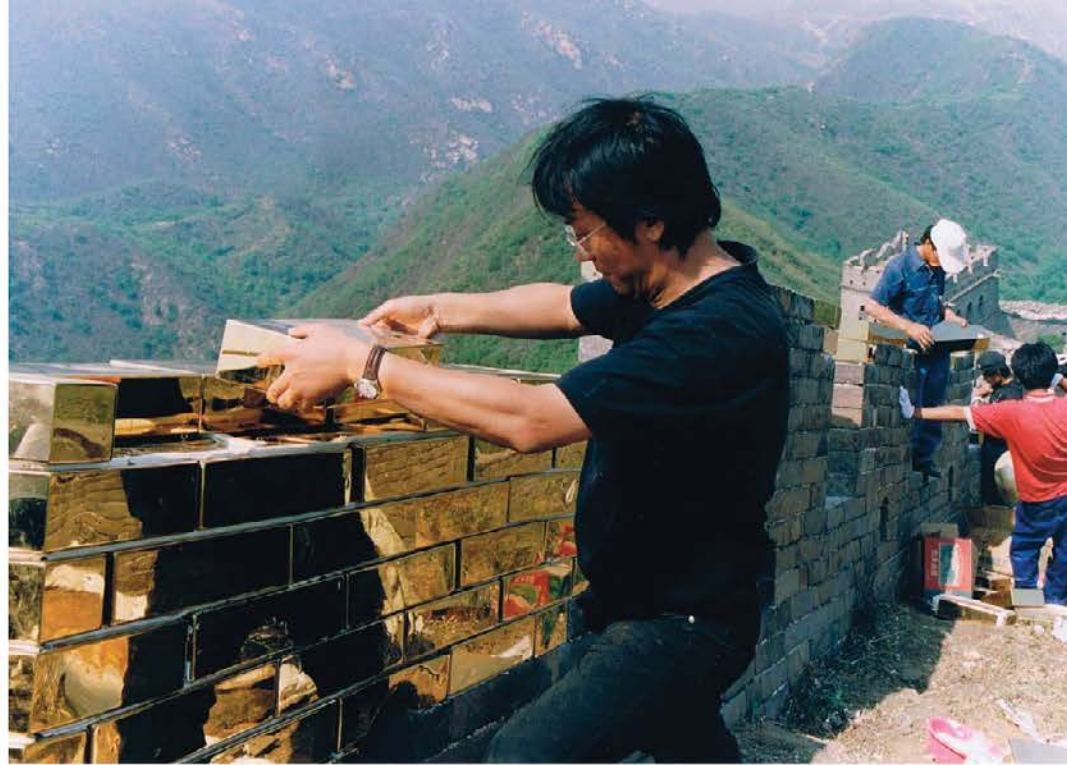

Figure 0.6

He Chengyao, *Opening the Great Wall*, 2001.

Figure 0.7

Zhan Wang, *Fixing the Golden Tooth for the Great Wall*, 1997.

two hundred and fifty bricks plus fifty half-bricks would be needed, which the artist and his production crew welded in his studio using wafer-thin stainless steel sheets sized to replicate the dimensions of the actual bricks already in the Wall. After these "bricks" were polished, they were then gilded with titanium so that they had the appearance of real gold. The phrase "golden teeth" refers to a traditional phrase in which a golden tooth signifies the wealth of an individual. To the artist, the new "bricks" suggest that ancient China, like contemporary China, was also subject to material desire. As Zhan states, "I merged these two symbolic things [stone and gold, real and unreal], and the question raised is related to the desires of the nation."[25]

Since China is the most rapidly changing country in the world economy today, Chinese contemporary art, it seems, should also fit the contemporary theory of globalization. By this theory, one might idealistically claim that since the end of the Cold War the world has moved toward a transnational order that will break down any national and local boundaries. Anthony Giddens, an influential theorist of modernity, claims that one unique characteristic, already evident, is the tension between the "expansiveness" of globalization and the "privateness" resulting from the loss of individual identity. In other words, there exists an increasing interconnection between the two extremes of extensionality and intentionality, between

globalizing influences and personal dispositions in the world of the twenty-first century.[26]

The history of the last fifteen years, however, may suggest a different direction. On one hand, the world economy has indeed come to be bound by globalization much more monolithically than ever before. On the other hand, the world has culturally and politically been divided even more widely by concerns of national identity and local economy. September 11, the war in Iraq, and the crisis of the Middle East seem to have validated Samuel P. Huntington's anticipation of the religious conflict, or "the clash of civilizations," between Christianity and Islam (later to be joined with Confucianism) in the twenty-first century.[27] The dichotomous pattern of "expansiveness" versus "privateness" in the age of globalization, however much it may make sense in developed countries, may have been challenged when applied to the societies of the developing countries. In the Chinese context, for instance, the major confrontation has not been between the individual and the global, but more strikingly has involved much more complex relations and ongoing movement between locality and internationality, humanity and individuality, all in response to rapid environmental change. Changes in surrounding spaces and living spaces have most profoundly impacted Chinese daily life as well as Chinese art during the last decades.

Aesthetically, therefore, historical memory and reflection as a language discourse have been incorporated into the presentation of reality. The forms and images from an individual artwork cannot be seen as an absolute representation of a real social status—individual or collective.

Although the dichotomy theory of transnational modernity may not be appropriate to the local context, this perspective has already become popular in narratives of Chinese contemporary art. For instance, there is a belief among some critics that the more "individual" traits a work shows, the truer it is to Chinese contemporary art. Many works, in particular photographs that depict Chinese family history and private life, have captured the attention of the international art world. But this critical stance overlooks the artwork's connections to both history and the current environment. Many critics and art historians take the "individual" narratives that appear in the art of the 1990s as essentially different from the art that preceded it. Yet if we look closely, we see that what appear to be "individual" narratives are actually to a large extent variations on and continuations of the collective. Many of the works that display so-called "individual traits," such as family pictures or photographs of personal life, are all nearly identical in subject matter, without much individual specificity except in the facial features. Most involve the period from the Cultural Revolution to the present, and are group narratives of the artist's generation and his or her parents' generation. For Chinese people, these stories are commonplace; they are attractive mostly to foreigners in the market and in international exhibitions for their exoticism.

On the other hand, in this kind of transnational narrative, it is as if globalization has brought about a global notion of what constitutes individual identity. Accordingly, globalization threatens to turn Chinese artists into residents of a global village, in which they speak their most intimate secrets in a standardized, international language. This is particularly clear in the works of those who have engaged in frequent travels around the world. All the dichotomous patterns listed above may become problematic when applied to the topic of urbanization in Chinese contemporary art.

Since the 1990s, many Chinese artists have enthusiastically committed themselves to the investigation of current globalization and urbanization. I would like to argue, however, that what the artists have demonstrated in their works cannot be seen purely as the portrayal of globalization and Chinese urbanization in the terms of the dichotomies of transnational theory. Rather, their work serves as a commentary on the impacts of globalization based on close observation of their surroundings, especially the transformational process from the agricultural to the urban. Their observations have drawn attention to the dislocation and displacement that signifies the complex relations among local, international, individual, family, female, male, and so forth. This dislocation is also a metaphor for the violent changes in the natural environment, and the disjuncture between material culture and the human spirit caused by rampant modernization. Consequently, reconstruction and the appropriation of architectural space, urban space, community space, private space, and public space have become the main subjects of contemporary Chinese artists. This not only expresses the estrangement in the current Chinese urban spectacle, but also, and more importantly, becomes a means of presenting the transformation of social class and identity in urban space in the form of a powerful imagery of locality and re-locality.

By 2020, the population of migrant laborers in cities in China will reach three to five hundred million, a number unprecedented in human history. In comparison, immigrants from Ireland to the United States in the one hundred-plus years between the 1820s and the 1930s, totaled a mere four and a half million.[28] Neither the needs of immigrants nor their impact on urban culture and the economy have been fully accounted for by China's urban planners. The conceptual photography of Wang Jin, particularly the works *100%* and *0%*, offers a visual inquiry into this social problem. In *100%*, several groups of migrant workers were asked to form a human wall, supporting a traffic overpass with their hands. In this image, their bodies are endowed with the power of steel and concrete. The workers represent the construction of the urban future, not only in terms of architecture but also of population. In *0%*, the dirty feet of peasant workers sticking out of cement pipes provide a sharp contrast to the modern skyscrapers of Beijing. One represents disorder and filth, the other

Figure 0.8

Wang Jin, *100%*, April 1999.

Figure 0.9

Wang Jin, *0%*, July 2002.

rationality and grandeur. In this work, Wang Jin suggests that peasant workers are a force that is able to facilitate, as well as devastate, the urban future.

The dislocation depicted in Song Dong's work is a metaphor for the switch in the social positions of the construction workers and urbanites. Common to almost all of Song's works is a deep involvement in the life of the alleys (*hutong*) of Beijing, where he lives. He is one of the few Beijing natives among contemporary Chinese artists. Song was also a participant in the apartment art movement of the early 1990s, when he was concerned with his own state of mind, his small living space, and his choice of media and materials. In his works after 2000, Song has been more concerned with class issues in the city, especially those concerning peasant workers, and has created a series of video, photograph, and installation/performance works called *Together with Farmer Workers 2001–2005*. Song regards farm workers as an emerging class, one that is, as he states, "a human symbol of a great agricultural country's transformation into a new social form. I do not wish to pay tribute to them in my artworks and idealize them. Instead, I wish to represent this important human symbol by means of both viewing them [the migrant laborers] and looking at how they view us [so-called urbanites, especially so-called upper-class people]."[29] In the photography exhibition "Humanism [*renben*] in China," held in December 2003 in Guangzhou, Song exhibited urban landscapes photographed by forty peasant workers. Cameras were provided by the museum, and the workers were encouraged to take pictures freely. The artwork furthers the concept of "seeing and being seen" and transforms the "other" in the eyes of urbanites into a subject who observes the city. Through such a shift in subjectivity, self-centered urbanites see themselves and their environment in a new light.

Zhang Dali is China's first graffiti artist, as well as the first "ruins" artist. His graffiti consists mostly of self-portraits, which appear together with the tag "AK47." This can be interpreted as referring to the devastation of human nature wrought by the violent disruption of urban construction. After making graffiti, Zhang documents the ruined walls, self-portraits, and symbols using video and photography. Each vista that he selects has a particular significance embedded within it. Often this is conveyed through comparison. For example, he juxtaposes demolished walls with the "permanent" landmark buildings of

Beijing, such as the corner towers of the Forbidden City; Stalinist buildings among the "10 Great Construction Projects" of 1959, such as the National Art Museum of China; or newer symbols, including the Jin Mao Tower in Shanghai. Zhang claims the demolished walls as his own artworks, locating the walls in a larger urban landscape and creating a spectacle by contrasting urban ruins and skyscrapers.

Zhang does not concentrate in his work on urban anthropology or the geographical issues of urban development. Instead, he concerns himself with human nature. His project title, *Dialogue with Demolition* (1995–2003), does not signify a dialogue between ruins and skyscrapers, or the new and the old, but between human and concrete, or between essential human nature and urban alienation. It is, in fact, an inner monologue: "Sometimes it's impossible to think and to pass judgment on the things happening in our environment. These events influence our life, dim our sight, and corrupt our soul. In the new era, reality is hidden under a beautiful cloak. For a long time I have made every effort to keep myself awake in front of the beautiful flowers and the beautiful popular songs, in the presence of the deceitful shows. I prick my anaesthetized soul, trying with the eyes of my soul to see the reality behind the appearances."[30]

If Zhang Dali uses his portrait to symbolize the triumph of the human spirit over the destruction of architecture, He Yunchang uses his own flesh to challenge mechanical power, seeing it as a metaphor of resistance to urban material culture. He has said, "My life is mine, and I can play with my body in whatever way I like. I have my choice at least on this point."[31] He commonly uses his body in a contest with concrete, a metaphor that displays his faith in humanism. In 2004, in an exhibition at the 798 Arts Centre in Beijing, he sealed himself in a room made of cement for twenty-four hours with only a small hole at the top for air. Nobody knew that he was inside until workers helped break the wall and let him out. In his work *Diary on Shanghai Water*, performed on November 3, 2000, he drew ten tons of water by bucket from the lower reaches of Suzhou Creek in Shanghai, then poured it into a boat and transported it four kilometers upriver, where he poured the water back into the river, allowing the water to flow back again.
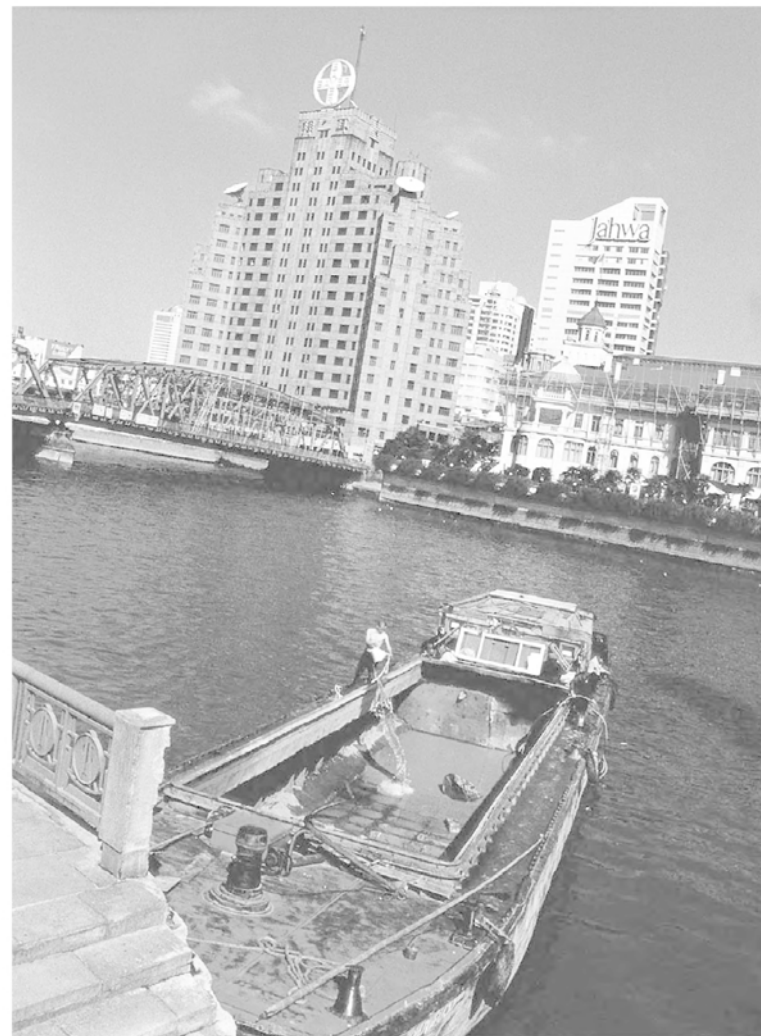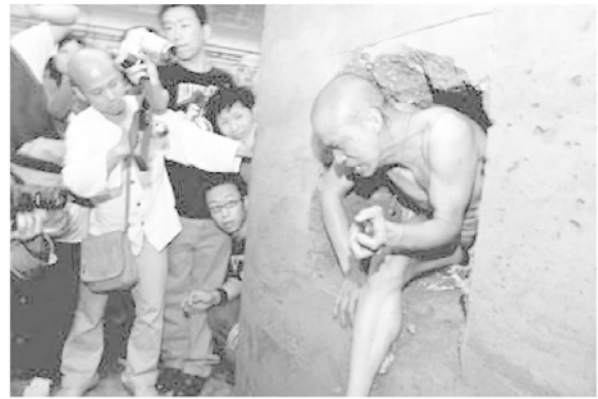

Figure 0.11

He Yunchang, *Casting*, 2004.

Figure 0.12

He Yunchang, *Diary on Shanghai Water*, 2000.

Some Chinese artists comment on urbanization by substituting a beautiful appearance or modernist aesthetic taste for a horrific industrial outcome. Many viewers of Xing Danwen's series of photographs titled *disCONNEXION* (2002–2003) initially believed that they were seeing abstract forms, but in reality the photographs showed electronic trash, such as computer wires and plastic outlets. Millions of tons of such trash are transported from America, Japan, Korea, and other developed countries to the beaches of Fujian province in China, where they are melted down and recycled. Thousands of peasant workers come to the beaches for temporary jobs in spite of the dangerous pollutants created through this process. Xing Danwen does not use overtly critical language but rather beautified forms, or the illusion of beauty, to delay recognition of the ugly truth. Her most recent work, *Urban Fiction*, investigates the nature of urban modernity from yet another perspective. From the end of 2004 to early 2005, Xing visited numerous real estate sales agents in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai and photographed architectural models of housing complexes. From the photographs she made realistic urban scenes using digital technology. Each of these images appears to be an actual urban scene, to which she adds fragments of her real life or others' lives, such as the image of a lonely woman drinking coffee on a balcony, or a pair of passionate lovers in a courtyard. These urban landscapes become fictions. Virtual space becomes a site for narrative. The fragmentation of space, and the insertion of characters into that space, brings these cold model vistas to life. In such constructed environments, an ugly housing development can be transformed into an apparently rosy utopia, or vice versa.

Another interesting phenomenon in Chinese contemporary art is the use of modernism as a visual form to comment on the issue of urbanization. One of the methods used for this purpose is what I call "maximalism." I coined this term not to characterize an art style or school, but to illuminate a particular artistic phenomenon, a kind of "Chinese abstract art" that a number of artists have created since the late 1980s.[32] Since these artists are not interested in either producing Chinese exoticism or representing the appearance of the ongoing globalization of China, their works have been underrepresented both in

Figure 0.13

Xing Danwen, *Disconnection disCONNEXION*, 2002–2003.

Figure 0.14

Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction No. 4*, 2004–2005.

China and abroad. Maximalist artists use modernist modes, especially minimalist-like forms, to address a totally different purpose from minimalism in the West: they are antimodernist. Their practice of making artworks in a labor-intensive and time-consuming way neither shares the utopian aims of early Western modernism, nor attempts to focus on the material or process itself as in later twentieth-century modernism. What they wish to do is to unify the process of making art with daily life, in the manner of traditional Chan meditation. This is an effective response to the challenges of current Chinese modernity, rather than a purely artistic engagement with any form of modernism.

The best example is Li Huasheng's *Diary*, produced between 1999 and 2004. An ink painter well versed in traditional literati painting, in recent years Li has created many abstract paintings in ink and wash, in a style similar to minimalist painting.

Instead of applying light touches, or painting without any apparent control, the lines are "written" out, with considerable force focused on the tip of the brush, as if he were writing Chinese calligraphy, not for self-expression but instead as a meditative activity like those that might be performed by monks. The extremely abstract form that results has, however, nothing to do with the early European abstract art that presents a utopian world, the "material utopia."[33] Nor is it the same as the self-expression in traditional literati painting. Rather, it is a direct representation of the artist's personal surroundings. During the period of its creation, Li was fighting with the Chengdu city government in Sichuan province for the preservation of his four-hundred-year-old house located in an old district and targeted by the new city construction plan. The district was finally leveled in 2005. Li's house, however, as the only survivor has been preserved.
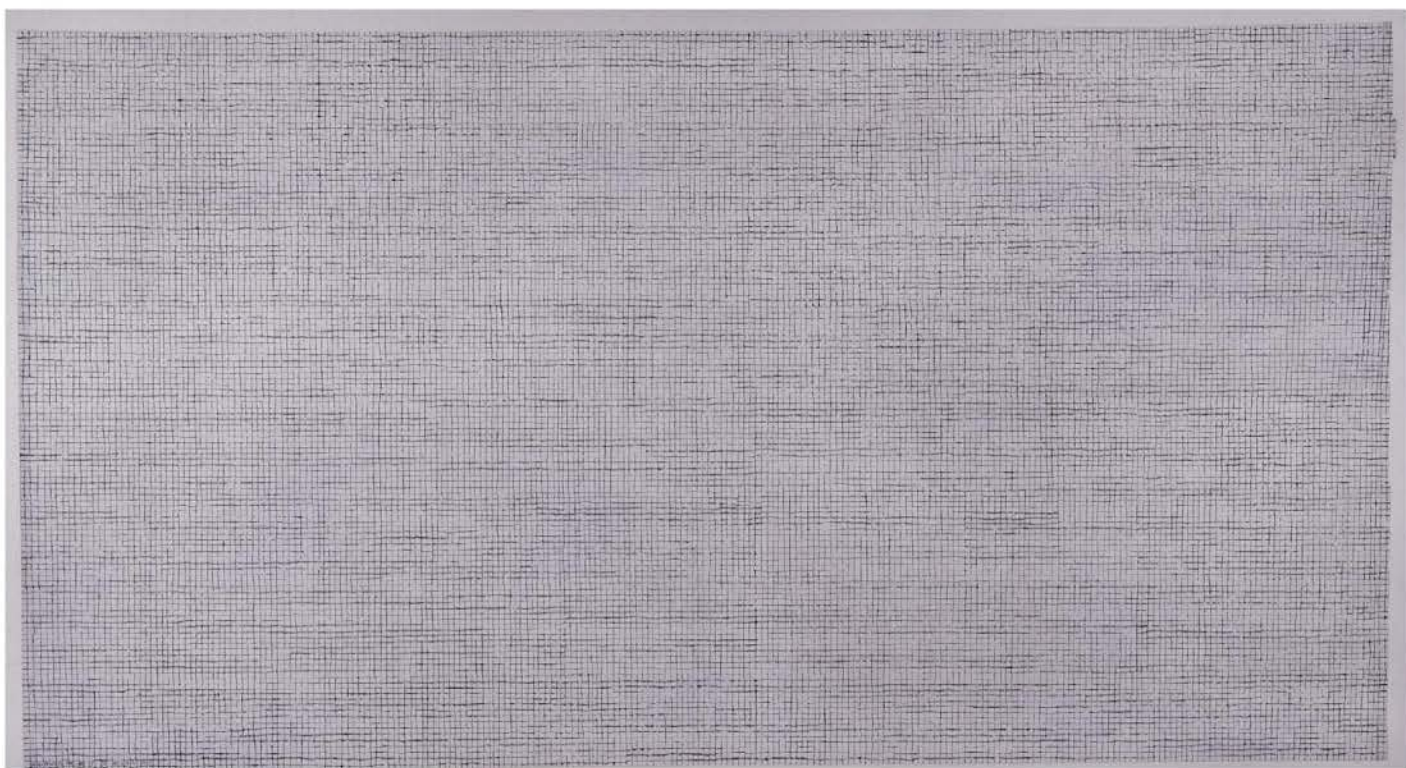

Figure 0.15

Li Huasheng, *Grain Rain,* 1997.

Figure 0.16

Ding Fang, *City Series: When Sound Fills Up the City Sky*, 1998.

Figure 0.17

Wu Jian, *Landscape*, 2005.

The other approach within contemporary Chinese maximalism is the deliberate use of abstract form to portray urban landscape in a style either very much like traditional ink landscape painting, or in a manner similar to Western modernist abstract painting. For example, Ding Fang uses a combination of abstract expressionism and surrealism to make his commentary on current materialism and urbanization. Wu Jian's elegant "abstract expressionist" oil painting is, in fact, a "life drawing" of a mountain of city trash. In the context of Chinese modernization, the artist relocates artistic modernism to undermine the meaning of modernity itself.

The methodology of dislocation is, perhaps, most fully achieved by Huang Yongping in his work *World Factory*. A huge topographical map of China, measuring 36 feet by 26 feet and made of iron, stands on the floor. It declines from the west to the east, as does the actual topography of China. The surface of the map, however, consists not of mountain ranges, rivers, and plains, but rather of innumerable tiny iron factory models. The artist implies that we are now, and always have been, in a globalized situation: we should, perhaps, turn the phrase "Made in China" into "Made in the World."[34]

Figure 0.18

Huang Yongping, *World Factory*, 2002.

Woman as City

Finally, I will discuss the important topic of Chinese women's art by examining the relation between gendered space and urban space in the Chinese context of modernity. There are two tendencies in the study of Chinese women's art. Some critics attempt to employ general feminist theory to analyze contemporary Chinese women's art, treating it as a part of the international feminist community, one of the dominant postmodernist theories. Others see it as based purely on personal experience, their priority being to distinguish it from Chinese men's art, which is understood by this group of critics to be predominantly a social and political discourse of the public sphere. Both of these approaches, I would argue, pay insufficient attention to the local context of Chinese women's art.[35] Rather than viewing Chinese women's art solely as the art of a "minority," or the product of unique individuals, or the result of feminist pursuits, we should read Chinese women's art as a particular way of responding to Chinese modernity as a whole, and therefore take it together with men's art. Chinese women's art since the 1990s does not merely pursue a gendered space, but rather

one that reflects the whole city as itself feminine. Its watchword might be, "Woman is the city."

Women's art has been an indivisible part of the whole project of Chinese modernity throughout the twentieth century. In the 1920s, a great deal of literature, film, and painting emerged from the New Women's Movement in China. These works were a rebellion against traditional Confucian ethics. At that time, the term "new woman" (*xinnüxing*) was synonymous with revolution, progress, and modernity as well as women's liberty.[36] In the 1980s, a decade marked by activism and enthusiasm for the pursuit of modernity and of ideological liberation, female artists became involved in the '85 Movement. Their emergence, however, was not catalyzed by feminism. Rather, their concepts and ideals paralleled those of their male colleagues. Furthermore, their work appeared to take on what some consider stereotypically masculine qualities. A clear claim that Chinese women's art was an independent art phenomenon did not come until the 1990s. At that time, Chinese women's art grew out of the context of globalization and urbanization, and it was influenced by Western postmodern theory

and artistic approaches. Nevertheless, the central issues of Chinese women's art are primarily those of housing, living quarters, marriage, children, and the harmonious cohabitation of couples—issues that arose in the face of the emergence of the urban middle class and the stresses triggered by this social transition.

When the feminist movement emerged in the West in the 1970s, many Euro-American women had already gained economic independence and access to advanced education. The movement was mostly a political advance in the evolution of women's social freedom and equality to men. Independence and individualism were the basic principles. Although the issue of gender equality entered into discussions of the social and public sphere in China as early as the end of the nineteenth century, it has been shaped by China's status as a Third World country with profound traditions. In contemporary China, women have not gained independence, nor have Chinese men. Both face the same crisis as the Chinese people move into a process of reconfiguring social rank and class. Family, rather than the individual, is the unit that bears the main brunt of this transition. Gender unification rather than a gender split is what is most needed in this historical moment. On the other hand, the traditional philosophy of family and community has affected Chinese women's art. While it is true that Chinese women have always formed an integral part of Chinese modernity, and that gender is tightly linked to modernity and nationality, what social progress there has been might, at best, be labeled "womanism" rather than feminism.

"Womanism" is a term coined by the African American writer Alice Walker, with particular reference to the situation of the genders in the Third World.[37] Its goal does not lie in the confrontation between male and female, but in the harmonious coexistence of humanity in general. Perhaps this is why many female artists working in China today favor the use of everyday household materials in their work, including thread, yarn, cotton, cloth, quilts, clothing and the like. These domestic materials may effectively demonstrate an individual woman's particular emotions and interests. In general, however, their use shows the artists' awareness of the intimacy of family relations. It is this particular intention that distinguishes Chinese women's art from that of

Western women artists who have made use of similar materials, traditionally linked to women's crafts, to address a feminist intention.

On the other hand, one should not overemphasize the personal secret of the artworks and thus fall into the trap of positing a "female personality," one framed by male elite discourse since the beginning of modern history. Liao Wen, an active female critic of Chinese women's art, argues that the kind of women's art that heavily employed household materials indicated a unique, individual "woman's voice" that differentiated their art from that of men in the 1990s. Yet the emergence of such art by women in the early 1990s paralleled the flourishing of apartment art at that moment, itself an artistic movement centered on the private sphere. In Beijing, apartment art was created in the residences of several artist couples, including Zhu Jinshi and Qin Yufen, Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao, Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, and Ai Weiwei and Lu Qing, among others. The women artists among them have since become some of the most significant contemporary Chinese artists. In this period, as I argued in *Chinese Maximalism*, it was not only women's art that was process-oriented, concerned with labor, and displaying an intimacy with domestic materials—so, too, was artwork by men. Perhaps the only gender distinction that can be usefully made is that male and female artists generally worked with different kinds of domestic materials. Even so, their art style generally conformed to the overall movement of avant-garde art at the time. Female consciousness overlapped with or shared the contemporary consciousness of men within the same context, and vice versa.

What is the social critique in Chinese women's artwork? In other words, how can we see their works within the local context of Chinese modernity? The current boom of the beauty industry in Chinese urban culture is a new economy that sees women (women's bodies, fashion, as well as women celebrities' charming smiles) as subject matter for city people's visual consumption. Many women artists imitate the visual strategies of this mass culture and utilize them as a new vocabulary in their own work. Chen Qiulin is an artist from Sichuan province who grew up in Wangzhou, a city subsequently buried by the rising water of the Yangzi River due to the construction of

Figure 0.19

Chen Qiulin, ". . . . . ," 2001.

Figure 0.20

Chen Qiulin, *I Exist, I Consume, and I Am Happy,* 2003.

the Three Gorges Dam. Many of her works—in the forms of performance, video, and photography—were done in the town before it disappeared. In one of her performances, ". . . . . ," Chen is seen applying her makeup in a ruined, airy factory space instead of in private living quarters, while striking a provocative and enchanting pose. In another performance, *I Exist, I Consume, and I Am Happy,* eight men compete to pull the shopping cart in which Chen sits, applying makeup. The winner, who received the cake placed in the distance, was allowed to pretend to be Chen's bridegroom. The performance is thus a metaphor not only for consumers of female beauty, but also for women as slaves to men who represent masculinity and consumer culture. Chen positions herself, however, in a more neutral way in order to transcend pure gender issues and to target the current

"city image project" (*chengshi xingxiang gongcheng*) in general. In order to understand Chen's neutral stance, we have to know the term *fenzi,* a term used by the people from the southwest region, such as Sichuan province, as well as in the northeast in Manchuria, to describe pretty women. It is a neutral or even complimentary word, accepted by both men and the women whom it describes. At the core of what can be called *fenzi* culture is sexual harmony rather than gender conflict and splitting. Its foundation is the relationship between the sexes in the folk culture

of these Chinese regions, rather than the feminist critique used by contemporary intellectuals. In her works, Chen Qiulin, herself a *fenzi*, attempts to use the metaphor of *fenzi* to comment on the idea of "woman as city," rather than focus on a more confrontational feminist approach.

During the last decade, stereotypically female descriptors such as "beautiful," "lively," and "stunning" have come to be used to describe urban centers in China. In the same way that masculinity was an expression of the cultural temperament of the 1980s, femininity has now come into fashion. Both are features of the larger culture, of movements in modernity related to the resurgence of Chinese nationalism. Since the end of the 1990s, however, a petit bourgeois lifestyle has become the cultural penchant of a new generation of urban young people. This generation has adopted as its style a strange femininity. One of its key traits is a mixture of romanticism and degeneration that makes it a *fenzi* culture. In my interpretation, highlighting this change is exactly the context as well as the content of Chen's works.

In China, as in other non-Western parts of the world, modernity in art always remains alternative and mutable. Indeed, there may never have been a steady, shared universal modernity. We need other criteria for reading Chinese modernity and avant-garde art. It may, in reality, have produced a new kind of visual space that merges aesthetic experiences, cognitive connections, and political interventions distinct from those familiar in the Euro-American world. Only by establishing these criteria can a genuinely non-Western, modern, and contemporary art come to being. Although contemporary art has rapidly changed in the last three decades, modernity in art in China throughout the twentieth century seems to remain steadily committed to the principle of transcending time and reconstructing space.

In the following chapters, I will examine how Chinese artists engaged with this intrinsic, self-experienced "total modernity," which follows its own historical logic in responding to international contemporary art and intellectual influence since the end of the Cultural Revolution, as well as booming globalization, institutionalization, and a market economy since the 1990s. A reading of Chinese modernity and the avant-garde requires an understanding of its particular social and aesthetic context, on one hand, and the discovery of an invisible historical logic, on the other. This is by no means to deny the profound influence of Western modern and postmodern art. On the contrary, we consider the influence to come not only from without, but also, and perhaps even more effectively, from within. Only with this "inner experience" can a better theoretical interpretation and historical narrative of Chinese contemporary art come into being.

Rationale for the Organization of the Book

In this book, I divide my discussion of modernity and the avant-garde, or the history of Chinese contemporary art, into three primary chronological divisions through which the above key issues are historicized and presented in context. In the first part I discuss "the avant-garde from the past," which refers to the Chinese avant-garde in the early twentieth century and in the post-Cultural Revolution period. In the period from 1976–1984, the post-Cultural Revolution era or *houwenge*, contemporary art consisted mainly of works produced under the influence of two academic trends. One was the exploration of formal aesthetics or "abstract beauty"; the other was the tendency toward a critical realism represented by the "scar" and "rustic" painting movements which, however, soon lost their criticality by merging with more academic and commercial styles. At the same time, self-taught young art groups such as the Stars and No Name voiced their avant-garde stances while engaging with both social critique and aesthetic modernity.

The second part of the book addresses the '85 Movement, regarded as the first avant-garde movement in Chinese contemporary art. This movement, which began, flourished, and ended in the brief window between 1985 and 1989, parallels the thought pattern of the May Fourth Movement. For the first time, Chinese artists sought a modernity capable of transcending both traditional Chinese and modern Western art.

The third part, treating the post-'85 or post-Tian'anmen avant-garde, examines how Chinese artists responded to the new political, economic, and global changes. Three primary approaches are explored: one

is the short-lived avant-garde, e.g., political pop and cynical realism; the second is apartment art; and the third is represented by maximalism.

Extending the chronological framework, the period from 2000 to the present is what I am calling the "museum age." This period is institutionally characterized by the emergence of official exhibitions of contemporary art, including the Shanghai Biennial, Guangzhou Triennial, Beijing Biennial, and the Chinese pavilion at the Venice Biennale, as well as the establishment of local art museums and organizations throughout the country. Museums have become the major arenas for Chinese contemporary art. Conceptually, owing to the museums' international vision and practice, art in China has been thoroughly internationalized and diversified in terms of both its forms and display. As a result, however, its avant-garde nature has ended.

The idealist avant-garde of the '85 Movement faced a metamorphosis of itself in 1988, a year before the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition and the June Fourth Incident. This metamorphosis included the dissolution of most self-organized avant-garde groups in the second half of 1987 under the pressure of the Anti–Bourgeois Liberalism Campaign and the art market's impact. A number of artists' groups gave up their artistic careers and joined the business world at this time. Another symptom of this metamorphosis was a silent shift in philosophical ideas.

There are several reasons for what we might call the silent change in tendency occurring in 1988. First, the *renwen* (humanist) groups seemed to tire of the enthusiastic embrace of humanism and began to move to an ambiguous and cynical iconography, which initiated the political pop movement. Meanwhile, the current of life movement also abandoned its enthusiasm for existentialism, characterized by a subconscious metaphor of individual feeling and forming a conscious symbolic language of social life. Mao Xuhui's *Patriarchy* (1988) is an example of this direction.

Second, the *guannian* (idea) group also made a change to a deconstructive direction. The most sensational event was Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* (see figure 7.13), which was first displayed in the National Art Museum of China in 1988 in a two-man show along with Lu Shengzhong. Beginning in 1987,

Xu quietly toiled at the phenomenal task of inventing over four thousand fake Chinese characters; then he used the Song-period method of woodblock printing to print the characters onto hand-bound books and long scrolls. In October 1988, he exhibited these objects at the National Art Museum in Beijing. At the time, Xu called this work *A Mirror to Analyze the World—The Last Book of the End of the Century*. The work had a major impact in Beijing and plunged both the intellectual and the art circles of the capital into a heated debate. One of the most surprising things about the reaction to *A Book from the Sky* is that it was so extreme across artistic ideologies, with strong divisions of opinion within both the conservative and the contemporary art camps. A conservative critic harshly criticized Xu's work, defining it as a "book from the sky," which in the Chinese context means a text that nobody can read. In fact, this is the reason why Xu changed the original name to *A Book from the Sky*.

The overall feeling, however, was that Xu Bing's work constituted a kind of eclecticism. Its calm, scholarly atmosphere and traditional appearance had the effect of pouring a bucket of cold water on the avant-garde camp's overblown, passionate expressions of human emotion and their aggressive search for new forms. It also posed a kind of conundrum for Chinese avant-garde artists, who were both surprised and confused by the work. The avant-garde circle saw both deconstructive and constructive intentions in Xu Bing's work. However, due to the tumultuous atmosphere of the times the work did not gain the serious consideration of the inner circle of the avant-garde until later. *A Book from the Sky* was exhibited again in 1989 at the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition at the National Art Museum in Beijing. Its impact was overshadowed when the exhibition was prematurely shut down due to an artist firing a gun as part of a performance art piece, effectively putting a damper on intellectual discussion. Two months later the mounting atmosphere of revolution exploded into student demonstrations at Tian'anmen Square, and the June Fourth Incident soon followed. Xu Bing left for the United States, bringing *A Book from the Sky* with him. The Chinese contemporary art world no longer had the opportunity to see his work.

However, before Xu Bing moved to the States, Gu Wenda traveled to North America in 1987 as a

visiting artist, and Huang Yongping moved to Paris for a Chinese avant-garde exhibition which took place in France in 1989.

In the early 1980s, Gu Wenda was the first Chinese artist to incorporate Western surrealism into Chinese ink painting. The result was a new movement of modern ink painting called universal current (*yuzhouliu*). In an interview from 1987 he ambitiously claimed that he wanted "to transcend the East and West" and find a new way in which he could define the general issues faced by all humanity.[38] However, Gu's period of rationalist painting soon came to an end, and he turned to creating provocative installations involved with his deconstructive calligraphy. The previous harmonious combination of calligraphy and landscape disappeared and was replaced by violent red, black, and nonsense characters in the style of a Cultural Revolution poster. During this period, when Gu sent a letter from his academy in Hangzhou to my unit in Beijing, he even changed my gender by addressing me as Ms. Gao (*gao minglu nüshi*) on the envelope, accompanied by a letter written in nonsense phrases made by randomly inserting sentence marks, parentheses, and commas throughout the words.

In 1988, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, two leading figures of the Pool Society, also shifted their attention from their "gray humor" paintings to several *guannian* projects that mocked the rule and language of orthodoxy in a method of appropriation. Wang Luyan and his follower Gu Dexin founded a group called the New Mark Group (*Xin kedu*) in 1988, later changing the name to Analysis Group (*Jiexi xiaozu*) after Chen Shaoping enrolled in it. The philosophy of this group was to liquidate subjectivity and self-expression, which they viewed as a kind of romantic sentiment appreciated by the avant-garde in the creation of art.

In rationalist painting, Meng Luding, who painted *Adam and Eve* in 1985, also published an article called "Chunhua de guocheng" (The process of having autonomy of language) proclaiming that contemporary art needed to make a departure from utopian enthusiasm and go back to painting itself, by focusing on the study of pure language.[39] This article caused a heated debate among the artists and critics during this period.[40] The most striking phenomenon is Wang Guangyi's claim of abandoning the enthu-

siasm of humanism. In the 1988 "Modern Art Conference," the second important avant-garde conference after the 1986 "Zhuhai '85 New Wave Large-Scale Slide Exhibition" (discussed in chapter 4), Wang pointed out that the coming commercial society would change the avant-garde's mentality. Therefore, the next step for contemporary art would have to be to delete the '85 Movement's romanticism. Art is nothing but reproduction; the artist works for nothing but fame. In the same year, Wang painted *Mao Zedong No. 1* (see figure 4.12), in which Mao's official portraits were set underneath a grid. It can be seen as the first political pop work by this artist.

Another phenomenon that indicated a nonidealist (or one may say deconstructive) orientation was the advent of new art students from the Central Academy of Fine Art who also made a departure from the idealism of the *renwen*. Liu Xiaodong and Fang Lijun (see figure 8.11), two of the new artists, began their cynical realist paintings in 1988, revolving around images of relatives or classmates from their personal circles and surroundings. These paintings were exhibited in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition that took place in February 1989. Therefore, neither political pop nor cynical realism emerged in response to the June Fourth Incident of 1989; rather they were already in existence before then. This is due to a fixed inner logic of Chinese political, economic, and cultural structures. In 1987, economic reform surfaced at a choke point caused by governmental corruption, on the one hand, and resistance from conservatives in the party on the other. Calls for further political reform against corruption grew violent in tone among the Chinese commentaries and intellectual tracts that eventually initiated the June Fourth democratic demonstration. It was this reality that drove the attention of the avant-garde, inspiring them to make a departure from idealism and abstract meditation.

This turn seems to make a lot of sense. In the long term of cultural modernity, however, Chinese art paid a price again for delaying the Enlightenment project of total modernity. They abandoned the project in order to serve the reality that was soon followed by both political suppression and the rising Chinese presence in the global market. The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, which took place only two months before the student demonstration of April,
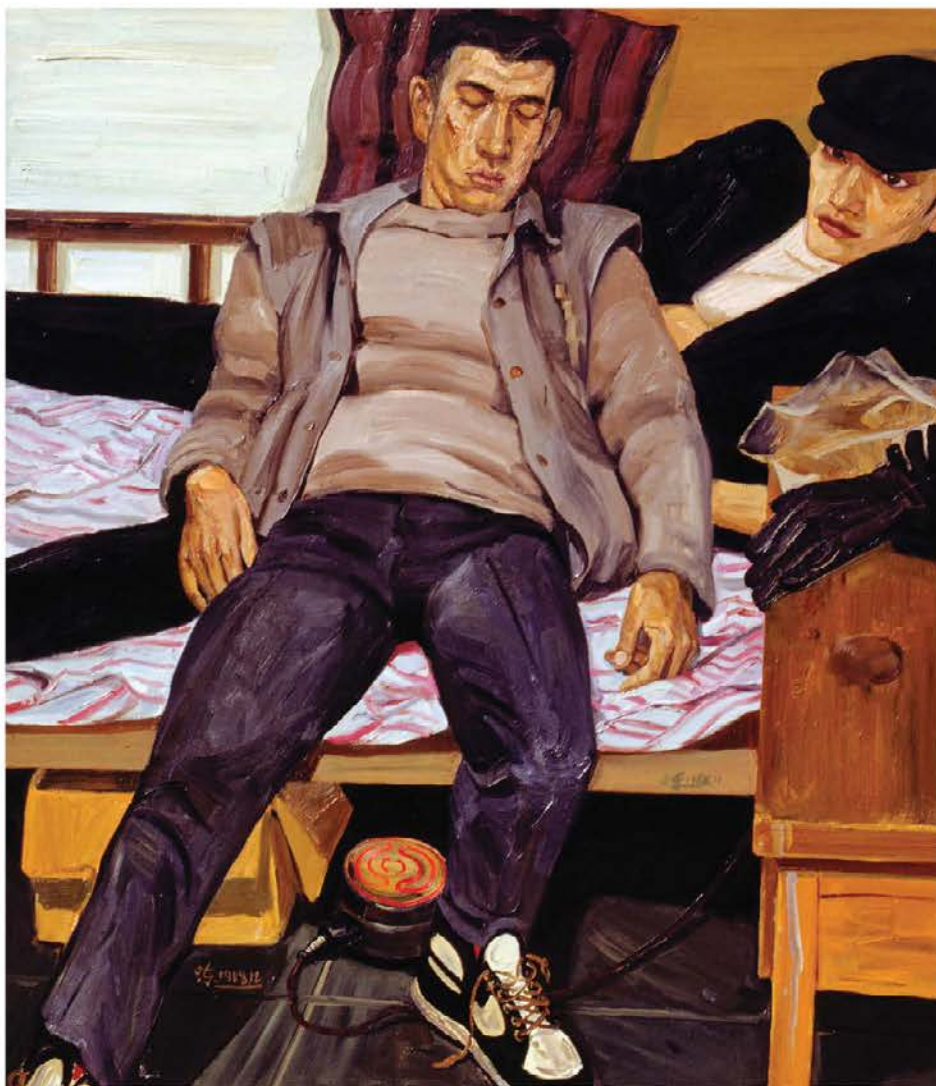
Figure 0.21

Liu Xiaodong, *Together*, 1988.

was merely a cardiac tonic that tried to reinforce the avant-gardist *renwen* enthusiasm, pumping the heart and driving the body of the movement. The idealism, actually, already felt hollow at the start of these reformist times. The last scream was echoed in the performances that took place during the exhibition, a provocative extreme launched out of the hollow void, most notably with the gunshot of Xiao Lu.

It is perhaps difficult to know which element to blame—the political change, the market environment, or the artists' responsibility—for the Enlightenment project's failing again. At least we can draw a picture of this shift. The dominant trend of painting of the '85 Movement, namely the *renwen*, gave way to Chinese pop. This form of pop in general refers to almost all the painting in fashion in the 1990s, favored by collectors, popular culture, and the market. Many of the members of the *guannian* group, including leading artists such as Huang Yongping, Gu Wenda, Xu Bing, and Wu Shanzhuan, moved to the West around 1989. On the other hand, the legacy of the *guannian* artists was transferred to a low-key avant-garde, such as that of apartment art and maximalism, which I will discuss in the last chapters.

This silent tendency witnessed a transition from the ideal avant-garde of the mid-1980s to a deconstructive post-'85 avant-garde, caused by the total cultural logic of the years around 1988. It is this avant-garde logic, rather than the later political event of June Fourth per se, that initiated the post-Tian'anmen avant-garde. In other words, the latter has to be seen as a continuity of the former, rather than a break with it.

The Avant-Garde in the Past