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***Bentu – Chinese Artists in a Time of
Turbulence and Transformation***
Suzanne Pagé, Laurence Bossé, Philip Tinari, and
Claire Staebler, eds.

Madeline Eschenburg

Book Review

Pagé, Suzanne, Laurence Bossé, Philip Tinari, and Claire Staebler, eds. *Bentu - Chinese Artists in a Time of Turbulence and Transformation: Cao Fei, Hao Liang, Hu Xiangqian, Liu Chuang, Liu Shiyuan, Liu Wei, Liu Xiaodong, Qiu Zhijie, Tao Hui, Xu Qu, Xu Zhen, Yang Fudong*, exh. cat. Paris: Fondation Louis Vuitton, 2016. Texts by Suzanne Pagé, Laurence Bossé, Philip Tinari, Pierre Haski, Lu Minjun, Nikita Yingqian Cai, Sun Dongdong, Claire Staebler, Venus Lau, Sasha Zhao, Robin Peckham, Jerome Sans, Liu Tian, Yang Zi, Zhang Xiyuan, Philip Tinari, and Aimee Lin. 179 pp., 83 color ill., Paperback €35 (978 0 300 22238 8)

About the Author

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Bentu – Chinese Artists in a Time of Turbulence and Transformation

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The exhibition catalog *Bentu: Chinese Artists in A Time of Turbulence and Transformation* was published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name held from January 2 to May 2, 2016. It took place at the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris and was co-organized by the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. The curators were Philip Tinari, director of the Ullens Center, and Laurence Bossé, curator of the Louis Vuitton Foundation.

This exhibition and catalog are organized around the central theme of *bentu*, a common term in postcolonial Chinese studies, literally translated as “one’s native country,” or “the local.” It is often characterized as a rediscovery of the roots of Chinese culture after a period of colonization and globalization. Providing a conceptual entry into the catalog and exhibition, Suzanne Pagé, artistic director of the Foundation, writes: “Bentu: native soil. In Chinese art, this term does not connote nationalism. Rather, it represents a dialectical concept that aims to reconcile the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ in a universalist and critical rediscovery of identity” (10). The curators chose multiple generations, media, and styles that reflect the variety of ways Chinese artists have utilized *bentu* as a strategy for understanding their identities in a globalized world. The chosen works can generally be divided into one of three themes: urbanization, environmental degradation, and, more broadly, global flows of information and capital. In a country at once developed and developing, socialist and capitalist, its people acutely experience the effects of such trends daily.

For example, Liu Chuang’s work *No. 1 of Blossom Bud Restrainer* (2015) is a semi-documentary video about the enormous number of catkins released by poplars that line the streets of Beijing, creating serious respiratory problems for city dwellers. First planted as part of a city beautifying project in the 1960s, during the Cultural Revolution, the government recently created a contraceptive for the female trees, meant to alleviate the situation. Liu’s video, a montage of clips from the Internet and official governmental propaganda invites reflection on the origins of environmental pollution, which, in this case, is both man-made and natural, and a direct result of poor urban planning. It should be noted that while this work is described in detail in the included essays, the catalog only contains two stills (each filling an entire page), which do little to convey the content of the work and may lead readers to overlook its importance. Xu Zhen’s featured work, *Eternity-The Soldier of Marathon Announcing Victory, Dying Gaul* (2014), builds on his previous projects that juxtapose ancient Chinese Buddhist sculptures with Western classical sculptures, one balancing upside-down atop the other, both headless. For this marble sculptural series, Xu followed a similar schema, but this time combined a replica of Jean-Pierre Cortot’s 1834 *The Soldier of Marathon Announcing Victory*, who seems to be catapulting himself, using his left hand, off the head of a replica of the first-century *Roman Dying Gaul*. The installation includes five repetitions of the same sculpture, all displayed on monumental marble bases. Although Chinese imagery does not have an explicit visual presence here, the seriality recalls China’s reputation as an imitator of Western artistic trends as well as the numerous factories producing copies of famous masterpieces throughout the country. Xu’s clever approach calls into question the Western Modernist value of creative originality. In resisting the simplistic dialectics of East/West or tradition/modernity that have tended to frame exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art abroad since the turn of the century, the chosen works add a nuanced brevity to the concept of *bentu*.

The essays included in the catalog provide a thorough background for understanding the complex issues addressed in these works, including foundational knowledge of the economic, political, and art history of China since its opening up to global markets at the end of the

1970s. In her preface, Suzanne Pagé provides a general definition of *bentu* and an overview of each artist's work, drawing attention to the global mobility of Chinese artists today (as opposed to ten or fifteen years ago) and the ease with which the included artists "move through 'turbulence and transformation'" (11). Laurence Bossé provides a short introduction to the history of the internationalization of Chinese contemporary art, historicizing the current situation as a time when artists have begun "unearthing and revisiting the indigenous knowledge, philosophies, customs, techniques and skills that they are now combining into a revived cultural corpus" (21). Philip Tinari also summarizes each work in the exhibition, pointing out their unique approaches rather than mapping out a simplistic over-arching theme. Pierre Haski outlines the history of economic development in China since the 1980s and its effect on younger generations of Chinese citizens. Elucidating the tendency of the Chinese to deny tradition in the earlier years of modernization, he argues that artists, writers, filmmakers, and designers are at the interpretive forefront at a time when development has slowed and multiple meaning-making systems still co-exist within one country (34). Lastly, Lu Mingjun analyzes these works using the yardstick of "Made in China-Globalization," representing a praxis in which China remains in an alienated relationship to globalization. He argues that, while the work of older artists continues to self-consciously address this power dynamic, younger artists with more global experiences have been freed from its influence. He further claims that Internet art (a medium common to young Chinese artists), in which forms of production and consumption have undergone a radical shift, can be seen as a "de-bentuisation" (42). Here, the assumption is that the strategy of *bentu* is only viable in parts of the world that are disenfranchised by global capitalism.

In her introduction, Lauren Bossé recalls the words of Gao Shimin, a Chinese critic and researcher who is the most active theorizer of *bentu* in contemporary art. She quotes Gao's statement that the notion of cultural origin inherent in the concept of *bentu* is "an attempt to re-envision contemporary Chinese art not as an expression of essential national-cultural identity but instead as the outcome of a process of historical return and re-discovery involving cultural dissolution and reconstruction" (21).¹ What she does not mention is that Gao Shimin has argued extensively about the double-edged nature of *bentu*. While it can be viewed as a strategy for globe-trotting Chinese artists to explore their identities, Gao argues, *bentu* has been used as a tool by the Chinese government and commercial enterprises to promote the neoliberal market economy and a shallow multiculturalism. He has called for a re-envisioning of *bentu* that would allow Chinese artists to define themselves on their own terms rather than within the ideological praxis of post-colonialism, which he argues is an imperialistic discourse forced onto non-Western countries. By glossing over this darker side of *bentu*, the authors in the catalog missed an opportunity to more deeply engage with the works, many of which capture the contradictions that make this concept so compelling in our present global context. Still, the catalog's many high-quality color photographs are rich resources that themselves speak of the malleability, complexity, and depth of this concept.

The choice of *bentu* as a theme is incredibly timely and appropriate in a world that is being drawn together by technological developments even as ideological polarities are tearing it apart. The curators' choice of artworks does justice to the chosen theme, none of which shy from the intricacies of global access to information and capital, cause and effect of environmental degradation, or the impact of rapid urbanization on both rural and urban inhabitants. This commitment is especially evident in Liu Chuang's video work, which focuses

¹ Page 21, quoting Paul Gladston, "Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition: Towards a Critique of International and Indigenous Perspectives on the Significance of Contemporary Chinese Art," *Tate Papers* Issue 21.

on a very local and current problem, but inspires contemplation of a wide range of globally relevant issues and their historical roots. Well-organized, visually pleasing, and informative, this catalog is an important resource for anyone wishing to gain a deep understanding of a specifically Chinese response to issues stemming from globalization.



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