From "Modern" to "Contemporary"
A Case in Post-Cultural Revolutionary Art

Wu Hung

Abstract

This paper was to have been Wu Hung's contribution to the conference "Contemporaneity in the History of Art" at the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown, Mass., October 8 and 9, 2009. However, he was unable to attend. The paper is presented here in the form in which it would have been presented. See also, in this issue of *Contemporaneity*, notes from this conference by its convener, Terry Smith.

About the Author

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Is "contemporary" an art historical period that has succeeded modernism? Is contemporary art a kind of modernism that has outlived its time? These are two questions raised by the workshop organizers. In this short talk — a self-reflection actually — I will take a rather strictly historical perspective. This is not to say that I reject philosophical contemplation on the concept of the contemporary. But as an art historian I must entertain the possibility that the word can convey specific meanings in different contexts, and can refer to varied — though possibly linked — responses to works of art.

For the past two years I have been working with New York MoMA to compile a book called *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*.[1] For this project I have read and reread many published and unpublished materials written by Chinese artists and art critics from 1976 to 2009. These texts are wide ranging in content and informative in many ways. One of their possible contributions to our current discussion is that they may reveal a pattern underlying the use of terms like "modern," "modernism," "avant-garde," and "contemporary" in post-Cultural Revolution Chinese art. By "pattern" I mean a certain discursive juxtaposition between these concepts, because a "pattern" always implies a perceptual and conceptual structure constituted by more than a single element. A "pattern" is a template that has been discerned from previous happenings, or a model capable of generating new forms and events.[2] In both logic and method, to discern a pattern differs from defining an individual phenomenon on the one hand, and from constructing a continuous historical narrative on the other hand. Whereas a historical narrative describes and interprets history as an unbroken process, "pattern recognition" — to borrow a phrase from scientists — attempts to identify a conceptual/perceptual archetype and to observe its manifestations in seemingly unconnected contexts. Because one of this workshop's purposes is to think about the notion of the contemporary not only in today's art but also in past art, one way to achieve this goal may be to observe similar patterns concerning artistic temporalities at different times.

Since not everyone here is familiar with the history of post-Cultural Revolution art, I should first provide some background information. Briefly, the Cultural Revolution took place from 1966 to 1976. During this period, "modern art" — *xiandai meishu* in Chinese — was officially banned from exhibition and publication. But after Mao died and the Gang of Four were arrested in 1976, unofficial art reemerged in the late 70s and brought about a nationwide avant-garde movement around the mid-80s. In this movement, called the '85 New Wave, more than a hundred "avant-garde" art groups and societies emerged all over the country. At the forefront of this movement was a group of young art critics, who took up the role of bestowing the movement with a coherent agenda. In their writings, these critics

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[1] Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Texts* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010).

[2] According to *Wikipedia*, "A pattern is a form, template, or model (or, more abstractly, a set of rules) which can be used to make or to generate things or parts of a thing, especially if the things that are generated have enough in common for the underlying pattern to be inferred or discerned, in which case the things are said to *exhibit* the pattern." See online: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pattern

unanimously adopted the term "modern art" for the '85 movement. Their final effort to sustain this movement was to organize a large exhibition in 1989, which they titled "A Grand Modern Art Exhibition." Three months after the exhibition, the Tiananmen student demonstrations took place and ended in bloodshed.

Chinese art after 1990 had a very different appearance: the energy of a mass movement was completely gone. In its place emerged numerous individual and smaller-scale experiments. Issues of common concern included art medium and language, identity, the public function of art, and globalization. Working with independent curators, artists also tried to create new exhibition venues and commercial infrastructure for their works. It was around this time, starting from the early 90s, that the term *dangdai yishu* or "contemporary art" replaced "modern art," appearing on many book covers and in exhibition titles. Yet, there wasn't any serious discussion of the concept of "contemporary art." Reading documents from that period, one gets a feeling that the term quietly emerged on its own, without any theoretical articulation or political endorsement. Instead of proclaiming a consensual view or agenda as "the modern" had done, it seems that this term defied social specificity or political commitment. Literally it means "art of this time." But everyone also knew that it didn't just mean this, because only a self-selected group of artists and critics favored it.

I have termed this phenomenon a "contemporary turn" in post-Cultural Revolution Chinese art.[3] To understand it, I believe that we should approach it as a series of linked conditions and responses. One important condition was an acute notion of departure from a previous position. When avant-garde artists and critics called themselves "modern" during the '85 Art New Wave, they identified themselves as participants in a delayed modernization movement, which aimed to transform China based on a western, Enlightenment model. This movement had started in the early 20th century, but was interrupted during Communist rule. In practice, these artists embraced newly translated western literature and philosophy, and made works based on reproduced Western images. Styles and theories that had long become past history in the West were used by these artists as their direct models. The meaning of their works as "modern art" was located not in the original historical significance of the styles and ideas, but in the transference of these styles and ideas to a different time and place.

During the "contemporary turn," however, many Chinese artists and critics abandoned, or at least distanced themselves, from the modernist undertaking. Underlying this change was a major shift in how they thought about history and themselves. Understood in this historical context, "modern" and "contemporary" actually indicated two different ways to contextualize post-Cultural Revolution Chinese art, one temporal and diachronic, the other spatial and synchronic.

This shift points to another crucial condition of the "contemporary turn," which was an historical and psychological gap between history and the present. In the early 90s, this gap was caused by the traumatic memory of the Tiananmen massacre in 1989. But if we broaden our view to observe a longer duration of Chinese art history, we find a "pattern of rupture" as a general condition of artistic creativity. Throughout the 20th century, violent intrusions of sociopolitical events, including wars, ideological and political clashes, foreign invasions, and the endless political campaigns mobilized by the Communist Party from the 1950s to the 1970s produced a series of deep ruptures. Each rupture forced artists and intellectuals to reevaluate and reorient themselves. Instead of returning to a prior time and space, the

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[3] Wu Hung, "A Case of Being 'Contemporary' — Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art," *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008): 290-308.

projects they developed after each rupture often testified to a different set of parameters and to a different temporality and spatiality. This notion of contemporaneity explains the sudden change in artists' attitudes after 1989, and also enables us to see 80's "modern art" and 90's "contemporary art" not as two consecutive trends, but as disconnected endeavors conceived in separate temporal/spatial schemes. When "contemporary art" replaced "modern art" in the early 90s, what it signified was, first of all, a sense of rupture and demarcation.

But was the traumatic Tiananmen incident the sole — or even main — cause of the "contemporary turn"? A careful study of post-Cultural Revolution art reveals that a departure from the '85 New Wave had in fact occurred before 1989. This understanding is based on an analysis of a series of art projects dating from 1986 and 1988. These projects are well known, but have been taken as representative examples of the '85 New Wave. I have been following this view in my earlier writings, but have begun to question this received interpretation. A critical reassessment of these projects shows that they actually signified an intentional rupture — a breakaway from the ongoing collective, modern art movement. Unlike the '85 New Wave that aimed at reinserting Chinese art into world art history, these products were typically iconoclastic, rejecting any historical framework or standard stylistic references.

There were three major tendencies in this departure from the '85 New Wave. The first — a deliberately iconoclastic, anti-historical gesture — is exemplified by Huang Yong-Ping's 1987 work, "*The History of Chinese Art" and "A Concise History of Modern Art" after Two Minutes in the Washing Machine.* Among the two volumes he machine-washed, the first was by the senior Chinese art historian Wang Bomin and had been used widely as a standard textbook in Chinese art schools; the second book, by Herbert Read, was well-known in Chinese avant-garde circles in the 1980s, partly because it was one of the few introductions to modern Western art available at the time in Chinese translation. Putting these two books through a two-minute wash cycle in a washing machine, Huang Yong Ping produced a pile of paper pulp — the remains of the books — which he then displayed on a broken glass panel atop a used wooden box. According to him, this was his response to an enigmatic question that had preoccupied generations of modern Chinese intellectuals and artists: How to position oneself between tradition and modernity and between East and West? Instead of providing another idealistic solution, Huang's installation challenges the premise of the question by eliminating the binary concepts. The paper pulp, as the joint remains of the two books, can be considered an art product that erases the conventional dichotomy between tradition and modernity and between East and West. Actually Huang had started this line of work in 1984 and continued it after immigrating to France in 1989. In the later cases, displaying destroyed books in prominent Western cultural institutions signified Huang's intensified desire to challenge the dominance of Eurocentrism.

The second tendency is represented by Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky.* These books are unreadable because all the characters were invented by the artist. But the books' composition, printing, and binding techniques were strictly traditional. In the first exhibition of this work in 1988, multiple copies of the books lay on the floor in rows. Large paper sheets printed with the same characters covered a wall and hung from the ceiling. Although the installation was striking visually, the project realized its prime significance through its painstaking creation over several years. In fact, when *Book from the Sky* was shown in October 1988, it was still only half completed; it was not until two years later that Xu Bing would finish carving a total of four thousand "fake characters" to print four hundred books of nonsense texts. Xu himself identified this "temporal" significance of the work in a short essay he published in 1989. The text contains an anecdote:

> One of my painter friends once told me about a "crazy" guy in his home village,
> who always went out to collect waste paper at a certain hour, washing these
> papers in a river, carefully mounting them piece by piece, and then storing them

*under his bed after they had become dry and flat. I thought quite a long time
about this person's behavior. Finally I realized that it was a kind of qigong — a
kind of cultivation of the Tao. It was indeed a very powerful kind of qigong. [It
exemplifies] an Eastern way of achieving true knowledge — obtaining sudden
enlightenment and correspondence with Nature by endlessly experiencing a
fixed point….*

Unlike the modern concept of enlightenment embodied by the '85 Art New Wave, here Xu Bing envisioned his enlightenment as the construction of an interior time and space through meaningless repetition. The idea of evolution was rejected; instead there was a "sudden" achievement of knowledge, a contemporary moment outside the flow of history.

My last example is an installation made by Wu Shanzhan in 1986. It was a windowless room covered with layers of torn paper and pieces of writing, and thus alluded to Big Character Posters, a major form of political writing during the Cultural Revolution. This connection becomes visible not only in the work's general visual imagery, but also in medium (ink and "poster paints" on paper), color scheme (predominately red), production (random participation of the "masses"), and psychological impact (sense of suffocation produced by chaotic signs in a sealed space). But Wu was not simply restaging a vanished historical episode: the words on the walls are not the revolutionary slogans fashionable during the 60s and 70s, but commercial ads that began to fill Chinese newspapers from the mid-80s. In Wu's simulation of Big Character Posters, therefore, past and present merged into a single moment. The result was a supra-historical temporality recognized as the contemporary.

A final question: Can we use the pattern I describe here as a general condition for the contemporary in different historical situations, not only in our time but also in the past? I'm not ready to answer this question definitively. But it is interesting to notice parallel situations in art history, in which rupture and departure characterized artistic creativity, and art projects signaled the effort to construct suspended time and space out of a linear history. Can we identity such situations as moments of the contemporary linked not by historical progression but by similar responses to history? Perhaps we can discuss these questions in this workshop.