Thoughts & Things 01 形象思维

Madeline Eschenburg and Ellen Larson

Abstract

The following is a month-long email exchange in which the editors of Open Ground Blog outlined their thoughts and goals for the website.

About the Authors

Madeline Eschenburg is a PhD student in the History of Art and Architecture department of University of Pittsburgh. Her research centers around contemporary Chinese art with a special focus on the relationship between urban-based artists and rural China. She has published in Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture, and Art Slant. She is currently living in Beijing conducting dissertation research with the support of a Fulbright Fellowship.

Ellen Larson is based in Beijing where she is completing her Master's degree in Modern Chinese History at Minzu University of China. Ellen’s curatorial record includes a retrospective exhibition of Xu Bing’s work, “Xu Bing: The Art of Rewriting China” at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

September 27

Madeline,

For our very first “Thoughts & Things” feature, I think it makes sense to discuss a bit about who we are, our personal goals for the blog, collaborative goals, questions for one another, etc. Through this exchange, I hope to introduce (and by extension) further develop our own understanding of Open Ground, its topics, connections to other areas of study, and growing relevance within the field of contemporary Chinese art.

While our backgrounds may be slightly different, we both share in this unique experience, living and studying in Beijing. Not only does this experience allow us to better understand Chinese language, history and culture, but it also gives us greater authority on Chinese art and its contemporary condition.

My own experiences over the past year at Minzu University of China (MUC) have focused on the history of modern China. While many have questioned why I have chosen to study history rather than specifically “art history,” I argue that there is a deeply rooted connection between both specializations. One cannot exist without the other, especially within the temporal framework of the twentieth century. For example, would socio-political movements such as the Great Leap Forward and of course, the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution, have left the same mark on culture without the use of socialist-realist propaganda imagery? As I reflect on questions like this one, I believe that a deeper understanding of China’s modern social, political, and theoretical climate allows for more thoughtful reflection on contemporary issues.

This research approach shapes the way I think about Open Ground. For me, Open Ground strives for topical inclusivity, connecting our own experiences and expertise to other areas of study, both geographically and temporally. I want Open Ground to function as a platform for artists, curators, scholars and connoisseurs to come together, engaging in discussion and debate. I hope to create connections across time and space, encouraging those with disparate backgrounds to participate in open dialogue, to challenge one another, and to foster greater understanding of China and its contemporary climate.

This brings me to my first few questions for you. How do your own experiences relate to your own goals for Open Ground? Recalling our initial conversations here in Beijing, our collaboration on Open Ground began after we both expressed similar interests in creating an online presence dedicated to Chinese contemporary art. Of course, this is not a new concept. We are both familiar with publications like Leap and Yishu with broadly similar goals. How is Open Ground a unique endeavor? What makes it different from other platforms dedicated to the subject?

Ellen

九月二十七日

Madeline,

对于这个形象思维的特辑，我想我们应该稍微介绍一下我们是谁。我们各自和共同对于这个博客的目标以及给对方的问题。在这个交流的过程中，我希望简单阐述我们对于空地这个概念的理解以及这个概念和其他学术领域的关系，还有中国当代艺术界内部越来越紧密的联系。

虽然我们过去有著不同的故事，但当下我们都在北京学习和生活，共享这个特别的体验。这段经历不仅让我们更深刻地理解中国语言、历史以及文化，更让我们亲身体会中国艺术和社会现状。
Hey Ellen,

It’s interesting that you are approaching contemporary Chinese art from the perspective of the history of modern China. In fact, I come from quite a different angle. My first experience with anything China-related, including its culture and history, was through contemporary Chinese art. In fact, when I got my Master’s degree I was initially going to study Italian Renaissance art. But once I took a class about contemporary Chinese art, I was hooked and decided to write my thesis about it. At that time, my knowledge of China was so minimal that I’m sure I misunderstood a lot of what I saw. But it was a great entry-point. Since then I have continued to study China’s history, culture, and language. I have lived in Beijing off-and-on since 2010 and feel like my understanding of contemporary art here is becoming deeper and more nuanced.

Perhaps because I came to the field somewhat late in my educational career and moments of total incomprehension in front of a work by a Chinese artist are still quite fresh in my mind (which still admittedly happens), questions of cultural translation are always of great interest to me. How does the meaning of an artwork change depending on its exhibition context? How does it change for the viewer deepening on his/her cultural context and educational background? As an American whose parents and grandparents immigrated to the States and who has been lucky enough to travel and live abroad many times, I haven’t had the opportunity to strongly define my own identity based on regional boundaries. But, I have noticed that because China has such a long and rich history, with family lineages based in the same area for centuries, there are many Chinese artists and critics who are heavily invested in preserving aspects of traditional Chinese culture in their own work, while at the same time integrating diverse elements from a myriad of local and global encounters. In creating Open Ground I hope to open dialogue about cross-cultural translation and the notion of "tradition." I am similarly interested in knowing how this tension between "tradition" and the contemporary-global operates in other locations and in other time periods. I hope that colleagues studying visual culture in other fields will feel free to comment and start a dialogue about the artists and exhibitions we feature on this blog, thus creating a network for knowledge-creation that allows for looking at each featured work or exhibition from multiple angles.

In terms of what sets Open Ground apart from other online journals such as Leap or Yishu, I see it as being a bit more flexible than either of those journals because it is not tied to a printed format at all. In this way, readers can continuously contribute to past posts, creating a pattern of thought that more closely resembles a web than a stream. It is also admittedly more local in
scope in that we, living in Beijing, will primarily be focusing on Beijing-based artists, exhibitions, and art-world professionals. However, it has the potential to be incredibly global in scope, depending on responses we receive. I think that is a good question though, and I’m interested to hear your answer.

Here are my questions for you: What are your impressions of the contemporary art world in Beijing right now? What kinds of questions do you have about this art world that you are hoping will be answered by the professionals we interview? What do you think are the benefits and limitations of a blog locally routed in the Beijing art-scene, and yet also striving for new understanding based on comparisons with other cultures and times?

Madeline

十月一日
Hey Ellen.

从近代史来了解中国当代艺术的确实是个有趣的视角。事实上，我是一个从不同角度尝试研究中国当代艺术的人。我对中国历史和文化方面的所有研究都源自中国当代艺术。事实上，当我拿到硕士学位时，我原本是想学习意大利文艺复兴艺术。但那时我上了一节中国当代艺术的课程，就被其吸引并决定以此为我毕业论文的主题。那时候，我对中国的文化的了解极为有限，以至于当时我并不确定自己是否能够理解我们所学的内容。但那确实是个很关键的切入点。从那以后我继续学习中国的历史、文化和语言。自 2010 年以来我一直居住在北京，即使我对艺术产生了一种归属感，也并不意味着我们对当代艺术产生了更深的共鸣。

也许正是因为我接触这个领域较晚吧，无法理解眼前的中国艺术的场景仍历历在目（而现今也无法完全避免这种情况），跨文化之间意见的表达让我着迷。一件艺术品所传达的意味是如何在不同的展览背景下转换？这件艺术品在不同观众的眼中，又会因为这些观众的教育文化背景而被诠释为不同的定义？作为一个祖辈移民到美国，并且有幸多次出国旅游甚至常住，我难以用地域的界限来定义我是谁。但是，我留意到——因为中国的历史源远流长，家族的根源可以在同一个地方追溯到上几个世纪，而很多中国艺术家和评论家的作品都是深受这种传统影响。与此同时又结合了无数当地和全球化冲击而产生的元素，创造“空地”，我希望展开一个关于跨文化交流并讨论“传统”这个概念的对话。同样地，我也想了解“传统”与当代全球化趋势所产生的冲击在各个地区和历史时期是如何运作。我希望在其它领域学习视觉文化的同行们自由地讨论我们在这里提出的问题，并展开一个关于艺术家和展览的对话，由此构建一个网络从大家能够从各自的角度来分析每件艺术品或每个展览。

至于要如何让“空地”在众像 Leap 和 Yishu 这样的网络读者中脱颖而出，我认为“空地”相较于其他读物而言更为灵活因为它完全不受任何一种文体格式所局限。这样一来，读者可以不断地对过往的故事发表评论，创建一个更趋向于网状而非线型的思维结构。与此同时，因为我们谁都还住在北京，所以我们将会主要关注北京艺术家、展览和艺术界工作人员。然而，取决于我们所收到的回复，“空地”同时也具有极其全球化的潜力。我认为这是一个很好的问题，想听听你的见解。

现在我也有几个问题想要问你：你现在如何概括你对北京当代艺术的印象呢？对于这个词，你有什么疑问想要从我们所采访的专业人士中得到解答？对于一个以北京为基础地，又致力于在跨文化对比中开发新的理解的博客，你觉得有什么优势和劣势呢？

Madeline

October 3
Madeline,

I too am interested in extending the reach of Open Ground through interdisciplinary dialogue. I like thinking about this project as forming multiple webs of connections, initiated and expanded through thoughtful reflection and exchange of ideas, rather than a linear transmission of information to a static receiver. Along the lines of your question regarding the benefits and limitations of the blog’s current scope of interest, I think focusing our efforts on art being created in Beijing is a unique endeavor. Many publications find cohesiveness in a single topic, which changes issue to issue, perhaps, as a means to not exhaust a singular idea. However, I hope our focus on Beijing will provide a clarity and cohesiveness, allowing for deeper
and richer investigations of varied artistic practices, exhibitions and general attitudes towards art making. Of course, we are in the very early stages of developing Open Ground. Our goals and scope may evolve over time, but I am excited to ponder the significance of art making in Beijing over an indefinite period of time. I hope this evolution will take place through not only our efforts, but also through contributions of our colleagues working within various disciplines, space and time.

We have a unique opportunity to not only study contemporary art, but also live it here in Beijing. Therefore, we have exclusive access to the Beijing art world. We may examine our own experiences in this moment in time in relationship with other metanarratives that are being simultaneously constructed around us. We are able to reach beyond exhibitions staged in 798, discovering art colonies, workshops and studios filled with a new generation of contemporary artists working both within and beyond the canon. At the same time, we may explore themes in contemporary Chinese art with greater depth than previously considered.

I think that with all the attention that has been placed on contemporary art in China, its significance and relationship to the contemporary moment has not been fully considered or even understood. It seems that the market has become synonymous with art making in China. However, I am not convinced that such broad generalizations provide any real insights on Chinese art. Like many other aspects of Chinese society, I think its art world is widely unknown and often misunderstood. Outsiders see certain artists as champions for ideas and politics that correspond to the way we think about China based on our own culture and value systems. In the West, throughout history, artists have sought independence from movements that came before them, seeking innovative, and often revolutionary new approaches to art making. However, in China, artists’ relationship to their forbearers is dramatically different. For example, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and establishment of the Republic of China, artists did not reject traditional painting in favor of modern aesthetics corresponding to political rhetoric of the period. Rather, as a form of national strengthening, artists embraced traditional painting as 国画, or national painting. In this way, tradition was adopted as a tool to promote nationalism after the birth of the modern Republic.

Of many questions I have as of late, I am interested in exploring how Chinese artists reconcile their national and ethnic identities, as well as tradition and modernity. Recently, I spoke with an artist who told me that while he views himself as culturally Chinese, he does not make contemporary Chinese art. I am curious what contemporary Chinese art means to different people based on their own history, education and professional experiences. Does it have a negative stigma for some? If so, where does it come from?

Perhaps, this is unanswerable, but what does contemporary Chinese art mean to you?

Ellen

十月三日

Madeline.

我也曾通过跨学科的对话来推广大地。我希望这个项目像一个由各种想法和交流构建并不断拓展的网络，而非线性的信息数据传播。在你问的一系列关于这个博客视角优劣势的问题中，我想我们关注我们以北京为坐标地的艺术是一个独特的方式。许多出版社通过在每一期中展现同一专题的不同视角以避免在单一主题上耗尽而变得枯燥乏味。然而，我希望我们能够持续关注北京从而提供一个清晰明了的视角，从而引导在各种艺术流派、展览和关于艺术制作本身的普遍概念中进行更深远的研究。当然了，我们仍要在建立地的起步阶段。随着时间的推移，我们的目标和视角会逐渐推广，但我仍然做好大量的时间去钻研思考北京艺术创作的中国性。我希望这种进化将会在我们和我们来自不同学术背景，不同时间和空间的同事们的不懈的努力下发生。

我们拥有这个一个不但能学习当代艺术、而且能够居住在北京的机会。所以，我们有无尽的资源去接触北京的艺术市场。我们可以讨论这当下这一瞬间我们所感知的和为我们的讯息。我们有机会了解798展区背后的故事，去探索各种有关于新一代中国当代艺术家们的工作室。与此同时，我们希望更深的了解中国当代文化。
Hi Ellen,

Yes, I think the definition of "contemporary Chinese art" is an extremely timely and weighty question on the minds of many working in the Chinese art world. Ever since contemporary Chinese art entered the international art market, the question of the relationship between visual expressions of "Chineseness" and contemporary Chinese art's acceptance into the market has been a much debated issue. Now, almost 25 years after this change occurred, this question is still discussed by many. It seems like the debate is centered around two conceptions of "Chinese:" one of which is iconographic, one of which is methodological. More recently, I think, the latter is the primary focus. Much like the artist you just mentioned, I have also heard people say that such and such a Chinese artist living and working in China is not a "contemporary Chinese artist," usually implying that the working method is not in keeping with a traditional Chinese method. So, for example, a Chinese artist who went to art school in the West and came back to China might be creating "contemporary art" but not "contemporary Chinese art." I've heard people say of other Chinese artists, "oh, she/he is not a REAL contemporary Chinese artist." I think this nationalistic emphasis is very much rooted in Chinese culture and history and cannot be dismissed, despite my very American urges to minimize the importance of national heritage as a large part of one's identity formation. There are dangers in defining who is a contemporary Chinese artist and subsequently including or excluding artists from this category as a value judgment. As Okwei Enwezor has argued, the expectation that an artist from a specific location will express something culturally "pure" and "authentic" through their art is both unrealistic and restricting when considering the vast amount of global connectivity that has come about as a result of globalization. I think that more productive questions in our current context are not "what is contemporary Chinese art?" But rather, "what is 'Chinese'?" "What is 'tradition'?" and, "who now and historically has had the power to answer these questions and shape this discourse?" China is a huge country with a variety of minority cultures, traditions, and influences, and so, I find it problematic and simplistic to discuss "China" or "tradition" in any sort of monolithic terms. That is why the most interesting works of art address these questions from an honest and thoughtful perspective based on individual and familial experience. So, I don't think it is possible or interesting to define "contemporary Chinese art" in a sentence or two in the same way I don't think it's possible to create an overall definition of "China" or "tradition." Rather, I hope that one goal this blog can achieve is to explore the different ways artists probe their surroundings and their relationships with local, national, and international histories and flows of knowledge in order to break down any preconceived and simplistic ideas we may have.
At this point I feel like we have both covered our backgrounds, our goals for the blog, and some important questions that are on our minds in regard to contemporary Chinese art. So, I can’t think of any more questions for this section. Please let me know if you can.

Madeline

十月十二日

Hi Ellen,

对，我认为“中国当代艺术”的定义在很多从事中国艺术业界的人心中是非常重要的。自从中国当代艺术走上了国际艺术市场，如何在视觉上表现出中国特色和中国当代艺术作品在市场上的被认可度之间的关系倍受争议。这改变发生约二十五年后，许多人仍在讨论这个问题。看来争论的中心在于关于“中式”的两种概念：一种在象征层面，另一种在理论层面。而在最近，我认为后者是重点。正如你方才提到的那位艺术家，我曾听闻他人道说在中国土生土长并在此进行艺术创作的艺术家不是“中国当代艺术家”，通常这些理论指称这些艺术家们的创作手法不符合中国艺术传统的方法论。所以，让我们举个例子来说，一个曾留学于西方、受西方文化熏陶后回国进行创作的艺术家被定义为“当然艺术”而非“中国当代艺术”，我也曾听到别人谈论中国艺术家——“噢，她／他 不是一个真正为当代艺术家。我认为这种国家主义的侧重点源于中国历史文化，所以无论美国艺术如何在衡量一个人时想要弱化国家遗产对于一个人的自我定义有多么重要。而当我们想要去定义一个中国当代艺术家是谁时，这问题看起来不复杂，但这意味着要去界定艺术家们是否属于这个范畴而将他们分类。正如 Okwei Enwezor 讨论过的，在全球化的变化下世界各地的联系愈发紧密，所以期望一个艺术家能够创造出文化上完全纯粹和正统的地方文化是既不现实又局限的。我认为在当下的背景，我们不应回答“什么是当代中国艺术？“而是“如何去定义中国？”“什么是传统？”以及谁又有这个权威的地位去回答这些问题从而给这个争论提供理论框架？因为中国这偌大的国家有着不同少数民族的文化传统和影响。所以我认为想用单一的术语去诠释“中国”和“传统”是过于简短且不通的。这也解释了为什么那耐人寻味的艺术作品往往是通过个人经历和体会并用朴实却又深刻的视角来表达。所以，如果我们在只言片语之间定义“中国”和“传统”，我们同样无法用一两句话去定义“中国当代艺术”。相反，我希望这个博客的一个目标是去发掘各个艺术家各自独特的表现手法来展示区域性、国家乃至国际上的历史和知识去破解我们过去简化的想法。

现我们已经介绍我们的个人经历和对于这个博客的目标，以及我们心中一些关于中国当代艺术的问题。所以我暂时想不到更多在这个环节该问的问题，如果你想到一些问题，请与我分享。

Madeline

October 16

Madeline,

I think you make several interesting observations, in particular, your hesitation to generalize “China,” and by extension, contemporary Chinese art, and its relationship to a single veined “tradition.” As I reflect on contemporary art-making in China, I also struggle to sum it up in a few short sentences. However, what does come to mind is an evolving amalgamation of China’s many layered pasts, presents, and arguably futures.

In my mind, it is impossible to view contemporary art making independently from its cultural, political and historical context. Of course, Chinese art has emerged within the context of rapid and complex social change in China. However, within contemporary Chinese work, conscious allusions are also constantly being made to numerous cultural and political historical frameworks.

As Gao Minglu has pointed out, some critics and art historians impose their own “Western historical patterns and esoteric standards” in their analysis of contemporary Chinese art. Like you mentioned, I think it is important to avoid our own “Western” predisposed urges when examining Chinese work made within the last five decades. China’s history and unique cultural context make it impossible to neatly categorize contemporary Chinese art using a Western model and/or Western labels.
For example, consider the groundbreaking 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. While the Chinese title 中国现代艺术展 literally translates to *Chinese Modern Art Exhibition*, the organizers adopted the English title *China/Avant-Garde*, as a Western audience may assume that a "modern art" exhibition would include work created during the first half of the twentieth century.

I think it's really important to think about different approaches to language and meaning when reflecting contemporary Chinese works. It is rare that I pick up a book or have a conversation with a Chinese artist where an allegory to history or a 成语 (Chinese idiom) is not dropped time and time again. These four character idioms are often deeply rooted in Chinese cultural and philosophical history, and often capture the essence of one's thought like no other piece of language can. Despite China's turn towards globalization, I still believe that elements of "tradition," as uncomfortable as this term may make some feel, are still relevant in our discussion of contemporary Chinese art.

Some critics would argue that the more individualistic a work is, the "truer" it is. However, this argument dismisses the work's integral connection to history, society, and to culture in general. Of course, as we think more about work made by a younger generation of artists born more than a decade after the Cultural Revolution, I have more questions about their work in relationship to culture. I am especially interested in further exploring this topic.

Ellen

十月十六日

Madeline,

我认为你观察到很多有趣的现象。尤其是，在简化“中国”的定义时你的踌躇。

拓展开来，中国当代艺术以及它与单一传统脉络之间的关系。当我反思中国当代艺术创作时，我努力尝试通过只言片语去概括。然而，我心中想到的是中国多层次的过往，当下和备具争议的未来。

我认为，脱离了传统、政治和历史背景去看待当代艺术创作是不可能的。当然，中国艺术在激进而又复杂的社会变革中萌芽。然而，在中国当代艺术中，有意识的幻觉也同时被用作许多文化和政治历史的框架。

正如高明珂所指出，有些艺术评论家和艺术史学家用他们各自的“西方史学模型和标准”在他们对中国当代艺术的研究中。就像你说的，我认为避免使用我们的西方标准去看近五十年的中国艺术是非常重要的。中国的历史和独特文化让我们难以用西方模型和西方标签去分类。

举个例子，我想 1989 中国的艺术改革运动。当“中国现代艺术展”这个标题，策展人方方将其译为 China／Avant-Garde （大意为中国／艺术改革）从而西方观众会推测一个“现代艺术”会涵盖创作于二十世纪上半叶的作品。

我认为在反思中国当代艺术作品时，尝试用不同方式去接触其语言和含义时极为重要的。看阅读和与艺术家交谈的经历中，我发现在翻译的过程中历史典故隐喻在翻译过程中被丢失并非罕见之事。这些四字成语在中国文化和哲学历史中根深蒂固，常能准确描述一个人的思想并且其他表述无法取代。尽管中国越来越全球化，我依然坚信着“传统”元素。不论这个词或许会让部分人不悦，仍然是和我们对于中国当代艺术的讨论极为相关的。

有些评论家会争论一个作品越具个性就越为真实。实则不然，这个观点忽视了作品和历史，和社会还有文化和的联系。当然，在我们想起在文革十年后出生的年轻一代艺术家所创作的作品，关于他们的作品和文化的联系，我有着更多问题。对于更广的研究这个专题，我抱有很大的兴趣。

Ellen
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