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- ¹ The 2017 Guggenheim exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* was a major retrospective of Chinese contemporary art since Chinese artists”””” started to participate in international art exhibitions in the early 1990s.¹ For the exhibition, Alexandra Munroe and her two co-curators selected close to 150 works by 71 artists and artist groups, among which only nine were female. Munroe explained, “The few works by women is a reflection of the male-dominated government-run art academies of the period (...) Most of the students were men.”² Munroe, like many curators who have put on exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art, glossed over the question by blaming the system for not producing enough female artists for her to pick from. While *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art* confronts this reformulated Nochlinesque question “does China have

any great women artists,” (p. 19) the book does not follow the “conventional narratives of rescue, reversal, or arrival” (p. 8) common to the discussion of marginalised groups. The book probes larger questions of how the national and global art world apparatus, cultural, and political policies, and the invocation and dismissal of recent gender history of China, have relegated feminism to the periphery or to a state of non-existence in Chinese contemporary art discourse.

- 2 *Experimental Beijing* is the result of Sasha Su-Ling Welland’s intensive engagement with Chinese and foreign artists and curators, art teachers and students, urban planners, and numerous art world participants during her fieldwork in Beijing from 2000 to 2002. Trained in anthropology, Welland took on the perspective of an ethnographer to conduct interviews, take part in art classes, participate in exhibitions and auxiliary activities, and have heart-to-heart conversations with women artists. Sometimes, those various roles blurred. Welland’s uncommon approach to art historiography led her to consistently question and reflect on her academic position as an ethnographer-interviewer-interpreter-participant, and on how, as a Chinese-English interpreter (she was often cajoled into the role), she inevitably partook in shaping a certain artist’s career or the direction of an exhibition. With her self-awareness and acute observation of a feminist anthropologist, Welland embraced the complex roles she played to make visible stories in the periphery of China’s contemporary art in which lesser-known women artists work against the canon to assert their agency through art. Visualising Chinese contemporary art as zones of encounters with shifting boundaries of urban and rural, private and public, local and global space, and gender difference, Welland provides an alternative reading to the “masculinist avant-garde” (p. 7) dominating the discourse of art production in China in the post-socialist era.
- 3 The book begins with a prologue that tells the fables of the parallel lives of two Chinese artists – Pan Yuliang and Xu Beihong – whose gender differences moulded their experience of studying in Europe and their subsequent careers in China in the early decades of the twentieth century. By invoking an earlier time, Welland reminds the reader of the historical roots of contemporary gender issues that are intrinsically interlocked with the women’s rights movement that emerged well over a century ago. Throughout the book, Welland constantly brings into the discussion “semicolonial, anticolonial, and late socialist” (p. 31) worldings in which specificities of Chinese gender history are quickly dismissed or disparaged in the current post-socialist, post-liberal Chinese society, and rendered lost in the universal grammar of international feminism.
- 4 The book is divided into three parts. Part I, “Art Worldings,” consists of two chapters. Chapter One critically outlines the genealogies of the notion of “avant-garde” (translated as *xianfeng* 先鋒 or *qianwei* 前衛) in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century Chinese art lexicon. Welland explains how the translation and multiple resignifications of the notion in Chinese modern and socialist history rendered women artists invisible when colluding with Western ideologies of the avant-garde in the post-1989 art world. By dissecting current operations of key art institutions, she considers how Beijing has transformed from a site of revolutionary nationalism into a culture industry centre. Chapter Two continues the discussion of Beijing as a spectacle of wealth, progress, and international development. The repurposing of socialist-era buildings into new art centres erased the palimpsest of women and rural migrants who were once symbols of socialist liberation and national progress.

- 5 The two chapters in Part II, “Zones of Encounter,” express the ambivalence of Chinese artists (both female and male) towards Euro-American curators and exhibition apparatuses. While relying on these foreign agents for disseminating their works on the international art stage, artists also fear misinterpretation and the effacing of authorship of their works. The conundrum was fully illustrated by the clashes between feminist art superstar Judy Chicago and the Chinese women artist participants in site six of the “Long March Project” curated by Lu Jie 盧杰 in the early 2000s. Judy Chicago was invited to Lugu Lake to work with a group of Chinese women artists. Welland, as the onsite observer-interpreter-videographer, witnessed the artists’ resistance to the hegemony of a prominent figure from the West. As the events unfolded, the resistance and resulting artworks by the Chinese artists, and Chicago’s tantrum, revealed core issues of the semi-colonial overtone of the collaboration, local cosmopolitanism, and the interlocking double binds – the conflicting spectres of history that quickly put feminism and feminist art at an impasse.
- 6 Part III, “Feminist Sight Lines,” consists of three chapters that discuss the author’s encounters with artists Li Tianpian 李天鵬, He Chengyao 何成瑤, and Lei Yan 雷燕. More than interpretations of the artists’ works, these narratives are intensive engagements as the author witnesses the unfolding of the artists’ thought process. Interwoven into the stories is Welland’s beckoning of cultural references such as the real-life story, and filmic and theatrical adaptations of *Red Detachment of Women*. Li Tianpian and Lei Yan revisited the forgotten histories of women’s contribution to socialist nation building and asked whether one could still learn from the female agency that is now deemed absurd in the gendering of post-socialist society. He Chengyao’s personal history and art practice posed many moral questions as a woman artist in China – female self-exposure, display of vulnerability, and to what end? Pondering the artists’ lives and works against the macho bad-boy dissident artist phenomenon, Welland emphasises the possibility of radical differences brought to the fore by these artists.
- 7 Welland is a wonderful storyteller. At times, the narratives with multiple entry points can get a little overwhelming. But these montages always bring home the author’s artful weaving of gender histories, contemporary conditions, and the manifold conundrums within the Chinese contemporary art world. *Experimental Beijing* is a complex book that demands close reading not only by scholars interested in gender issues in art but also those who wish for a multi-dimensional picture of the worlds of Chinese contemporary art. The accompanying bilingual website for the project provides Chinese characters (<http://experimentalbeijing.com>), but a Chinese glossary within the book would have been a helpful tool for readers.

NOTES

1. *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World* was held at the Guggenheim New York from 6 October 2017 to 7 January 2018.

2. Jane Perlez, "Where the Wild Things Are: China's Art Dreamers at the Guggenheim," *The New York Times*, 20 September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/arts/design/guggenheim-art-and-china-after-1989.html> (accessed on 1 August 2019).

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