Histories and Archives of Chinese Contemporary Art: New and Disparate Elements

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REFERENCES

Shanghai Contemporary Art Archival Project 1998-2012, Arthub: From China to a Global Network 2008-2018, Aurora Museum and Arthub: Contemporary Art within a Historical Collection 2013-2016, Milan : Mousse Publishing, 2018, 3 volumes
Lü Peng, *Chinese Contemporary Art since 1989*, Paris : Somogy, 2018
Sasha Su-Ling Welland, *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art*, Durham : Duke University Press, 2018

- 1 The simultaneous publication of three different types of books on Chinese contemporary art confronts readers firstly to a series of booklets on Shanghai that combine personal accounts, analyses and documentation from 1998 to the present, written and published by Davide Quadrio; secondly to a comprehensive historical essay spanning the period from 1989 to 2016, written by Lü Peng, an institutionally well-integrated art historian who is attempting to build a properly Chinese general history; and finally to a work by an American researcher who examines, through an anthropological approach, art in Beijing over the same period of time, from the angle of gender and globalisation. The juxtaposition produces quite a complementary overview of the emergence of experimental art exposed to a globalised gaze over the past thirty years. *Shanghai Contemporary Art Archival Project 1998-2012*, the first of the three volumes published by Mousse, combines introductory articles by the creators and protagonists of the first non-profit art centre in Shanghai, including Vigy Jin, Davide Quadrio as well as the artists who were behind a series of milestone exhibitions. *Art for Sale*, organised

by Xu Zhen and Yang Zhenzhong, was the occasion for Davide Quadrio and Vigy Jin to meet the thirty-three artists from Beijing, Shanghai and elsewhere who participated in the exhibition. It took place on the premises of a future supermarket. There were installations and a shop area, where objects created especially for the occasion were displayed and sold. Two days after a very successful opening party, authorities closed the exhibition under administrative and moral pretexts (10-13 April 1999). This was the starting point for a series of protests held in various places, which brought together artists as curators and Quadrio, who was at that point attempting to import a still seldom-practiced professionalism. Essays on the Biz art art centre and the online *Art-Ba-Ba Contemporary Art Forum* launched in 2006 (Xu Zhen), exhibitions (Yang Zhenzhong), new curating practices (Yu Mingjun), the evolution and resources of *Art-Ba-Ba* (Zhao Yao), are all personal accounts as much as they are assessments of the period. As for Davide Quadrio, he widens his narrative through an approach of curating that goes beyond the compilation of exhibitions carried out by the *contemporary archival project* (in which 3.000 exhibitions have been referenced).¹

- 2 The compilation of information, documents and personal accounts undertaken by the instigators of part of the Shanghai scene is not exclusive to them. The feeling of having partaken in an exceptional and atypical history on the international scene has encouraged numerous other initiatives such as ambitious documentary enterprises and the publication of sources that are neither coordinated or consistent. Initiatives are rife: Asia Art Archive, who were pioneers of this movement in Hong Kong; the paper sources compiled and published *in extenso* by Fei Dawei, as well as Wu Hung's already dated Chicago publication in 2000, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, that included sections on exhibitions from 1989 to 2000. Syntheses, on the other hand, are harder to come across. However, before addressing the latter, it is important to emphasise the fact that although many projects, announcements, debates, interviews and press cuttings are to be found in the various archives, they also include textual and visual performance material. There are many of these, and archives are the only way to preserve them. Compilation makes them immediately available for the most part. Vigy Jin, Davide Quadrio and Xu Chen, as instigators of Biz art and possessors of these archives, claim they revealed these contributions to history and that they can describe more accurately than researchers the complexity of this period of globalisation in Shanghai.
- 3 Lü Peng, a lecturer at the Art history department of the Chinese Academy of Art in Hangzhou, and director of the Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art, has already written on the history of Chinese art. Therefore, he introduces his book by a short reminder on the history of the end of the 19th century and a great part of the 20th century, in order to be able to set his starting point in 1989. That year saw the appearance of globalisation and consequentially capitalism in China, a fact whose immediate consequences Lü Peng points out: "For example, in the art field the changes are obvious, and at the same time as increasingly lively art expositions have been promoting art sales since the 1990s, the rapidity of this development has blurred the boundaries between art historians, critics, art consultants, curators, brokers and teachers, and if the possibility exists, a person regarded as a serious art historian can be a consultant for an art expo specifically designed to sell art and the head of an advertising company can in turn become an art curator."² There is a great difference between trying to situate China within a universal history and the fact of assigning

these internal upheavals to the art field, which was completely dependent on state power up until then. Lü Peng describes the 1979-1989 period as ideologically excitable, and before evoking its developments he alludes to the event that apparently signalled its end (as well as the closing down of the exhibition by the authorities): when the artist Xiao Lu's shot at her work on 5 February 1989 at the first major Chinese art exhibition at the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA). A brief glance backwards seems to attribute this excitement to the feeling of greater freedom due to the end of the Cultural Revolution and the arrest of the Gang of Four (1976). The author does specify, however, that Deng Xiaoping set the limits very early on: "In the ideological field there can be no spiritual pollution."³ Lü Peng takes care to develop a "neutral" vision of the debates between government and intellectuals, before concluding with personal accounts of the evacuation of Tian'anmen Square with excerpts from letters by Zhang Xiaogang to Yang Qian, who had emigrated to the United States. "Throughout 1990, with the exception of those artists and critics who had left the country, those who continued to live in different cities in China felt they were subject to an unprecedented listless and helpless mental state: the age of ideological excitement had ended."⁴

- 4 The first chapters develop the narrative of the different people involved through direct quotations, yet without describing the dramatic events in too much length. This is interesting inasmuch as it articulates political facts to ideological debates, supported by sources, while signalling the opportunism of power and artists alike when faced with the development of the economy and the art market. This social, politically correct, art history reveals by contrast the will displayed by the Shanghai artists to disrupt professional practices and institutional authorities while avoiding total dependence on the market. Lü Peng's book is more than a mere narrative, it combines the Chinese political sphere with a rather free evocation of Western art history and current theory. Lü Peng concludes by emphasizing the fact that even though they are seen as subversive, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière are translated and read in schools. He admits that there is but little room for democracy and freedom, but considers that they would be of little use to solve Chinese problems and conflicts.
- 5 Sasha Su-Ling Welland, who is a lecturer in Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington led an immersive investigation during her stays in China. She developed a method that is rare in Contemporary Art history, which consists of studying precise cases of artists and works, and so painstakingly describing the context that through this description, the reader can access the entire art field in a deeply changing society. The critical insight of the choice of examples guarantees their formidable relevance. Most of them are women, and I would like to mention three of them. The first example is that of Xiao Lu in 1989, the second, with more of a male presence, focuses on the urban and human changes in relation to urban growth, the third questions whether artists who have received conventional training were opportunistic in the face of the boom of disruptive contemporary art. During the "Chinese modern art exhibition", curated by Gao Minglu, whose English title was *China/Avant-garde* and which was dubbed *no U-turn* (1989, Chinese National Museum of Art), Xiao Lu and a school friend, Tang Song, were arrested after the former fired at her installation, which consisted of two telephone boxes each containing black-and-white human figures (one male and one female) seen from behind and seemingly in conversation, and a mirror behind each box, which is what Xiao fired at. Her partner was elusive as to his responsibility in the work, but Xiao claimed it, to her male counterparts' disinterest. After spending several years in Australia, she came back to

China in 1997 and produced *Fifteen Shots*: glass panels covered with a photograph of her shooting a gun and shot through with as many shots as there were panels. She later published an autobiographical book, *Dialogue*, in which she evoked this work, in relation to the rape she survived when she was younger. In the book, she describes the piece as a denunciation of her abuser, of the academic system he was part of and, more generally of “the patriarchal power perpetuated by the academy system” (p. 59). This example was introduced by a description of the events and of contemporary art terminologies, by a historical summary of women’s condition in China, followed by an in-depth description of the academic system, a determining context for the present period. Sasha Su-Ling Welland chooses typical examples that highlight institutional, ideological and economical conflicts and contradictions. In the chapter devoted to Beijing as showcase, she emphasises the very unequal market, with art and artists on one side and real estate speculation on the other. The latter tears down working-class neighbourhoods, employs status-less rural workers, and exchanges space for art in order to increase the value of real estate projects. Sasha Su-Ling Welland examines the *Ocean Paradise* operation, that used a gigantic closed-down cotton factory to create the East Modern Art Center. On 23 August 2001, its opening hosted a multimedia performance called *Dancing with Mingong* – the *mingong* being migrant workers with no real status.⁵ The performance, which revealed and dealt with a difficult situation in a critical manner, weakened the art centre’s stability. Sasha Su-Ling Welland lists other operations and more or less long-lived art centres. Some passages of the book describe differing female histories, for example the case of Li Tianpian, an artist who chose to remain faithful to the soviet aesthetics she was trained into during her studies, thus introducing a discussion on the role of women in the aesthetics of communist China. Another example is that of He Chengyao, who improvised a performance during the very expensive installation of H.A. Schult on the Great Wall by baring her chest – driving the German artist’s work into the background. This led He Chengyao to distance herself from her career as a neo-expressionist painter and adopt a practice dominated by performance art in dialogue with various major Western artists.

- 6 Readers anxious to learn more about contemporary Chinese Art history will be able to grasp the tensions and conflicts generated by the Chinese communist regime and its economic realism, through a thorough knowledge of historical time displayed in interviews and immersive descriptions. These tensions and conflicts affect artists in their lives and work. Sasha Su-Ling Welland’s rigorously documented book is able to situate women artists and their contributions within present-day Chinese society, without dismissing the lessons of history. Her work, which is much deeper than it seems at first, explores every temporal scale. In this regard, it distinguishes itself from Lü Peng’s book, which dwells neither on the works nor on the lives of the artists; and from the books on Shanghai, which explicit the inception of a Westernised institutional contemporary art network in the exceptional context of that megalopolis, and which are more akin to an embryo of a history of exhibitions, outlined by the beginnings of the archive formatting process.

NOTES

1. The three volumes published by Mousse, as well as an essay by Philippe Pirotte, all include a series of references on exhibitions classified by chronological order.
 2. Lü Peng, *Chinese Contemporary Art since 1989*, Paris: Somogy, 2018, p. 12
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 32
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 56
 5. Some of the workers took part in the performance.
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AUTHORS

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After having published an English translation of the works of Korean art critic Lee Yil for the AICA (Les Presses du réel, 2018), Jean-Marc Poinot is currently preparing an international symposium on the archives of the Shanghai Power Art Center in collaboration with Henry Meyric Hughes. He is professor emeritus at Rennes 2 university and president of the GIS Archives de la critique d'art.